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## What Can Jesus Teach Us About Student Engagement?

Glenn James

*University of the Incarnate Word*

Elda Martinez

*University of the Incarnate Word*

Sherry Herbers

*University of the Incarnate Word*

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## What Can Jesus Teach Us About Student Engagement?

Glenn James, Elda Martinez, and Sherry Herbers  
University of the Incarnate Word

*This article examines Jesus's teaching methods as described in the four Gospels, highlighting the ways in which He led listeners to participate actively in their learning. We identify similarities between many of Jesus's techniques and current practices in the field of student engagement, with a focus on applications for instructors in higher education. Several of His approaches, most notably storytelling and the use of analogies, point to recommendations for improving teaching practice by increasing student engagement in the learning process.*

### Keywords

Higher education, student engagement, teaching strategies

**A**t a Catholic college grounded in Incarnational Spirituality, what could faculty learn by studying Jesus as an engaging teacher? At the authors' university, a campus-wide initiative on student engagement led us to this question as we sought ways to further develop our skills to involve students in their own learning. Was there anything Jesus did that could apply to today's modern classroom/learners? Would His teaching strategies translate?

We explored the Gospel stories for accounts of Jesus's teaching that suggested a deliberate approach to engaging His listeners as students. We compared our findings to modern sources on student engagement, including Jesuit references, seminal writings by American leaders in the field, and more recent discoveries rooted in the biology of learning. What was lacking in these references was a comparison of those results to modern research in the practice of student engagement, as well as any generalization to allow a modern college instructor to apply the methods that Jesus demonstrated. This is the gap we aim to address here. The flow of this article mirrors the authors' own journey of discovery as we identified meaningful similarities between Jesus's example and the modern material.

### Literature Review

Our exploration resonated with Robert H. Stein's book *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (1994), which includes an extensive chapter on ways that Jesus captivated His listeners. Stein (1994) offers an overview of the Gospel accounts of Jesus's teaching, somewhat broader than the focus on "parables" in many classic texts, for example, those by Dodd (1961) and Jeremias (1963). Stein (1994) deliberately avoided any analysis of how to attribute Gospel episodes distinctly to Jesus, to the Evangelist author, or to the church, allowing him to present a broad perspective of the teaching methods described in the Gospels, as well as of the content of Jesus's lessons.

From this perspective, Stein (1994) detailed many of the rhetorical devices Jesus used that made Him an "exciting" teacher (1994). Stein (1994) thoroughly explored methods addressed by other authors, looking closely at Jesus's use of simile, metaphor, proverb, and paradox, and His use of questions (Dodd, 1961; Hultgren, 2000; Jeremias, 1963; Schottroff, 2006; Snodgrass, 2008). Stein (1994)—like Keener (2009)—has analyzed the Gospels in their original language, leading him to identify more specific literary forms not found in some other sources—examples of which include accounts of Jesus's use of puns, riddles, irony, and poetry.

#### The Use of Parables as a Primary Teaching Strategy

Most modern analyses of Jesus's use of parables trace back to C. H. Dodd (1961), whose revised book derived from seminal work conducted in his 1935 course at Yale. Dodd (1961) delivered a meticulous study of the nature of the parables and what they tell readers about the kingdom of God. Although Dodd (1961) did not explore any evidence of how Jesus's listeners responded to the parables, he did note the engaging nature of a parable, "leaving in the mind sufficient doubt about its application to tease it into active thought" (p. 5). Jeremias (1963) took the next step in the classic progression of parable analysis, based on detailed implications of early translations and deeply ingrained with his personal familiarity with ancient Palestine. Like Dodd (1961), Jeremias (1963) noted the active nature of Jesus's teaching, pointing out that "the parables of Jesus compel His hearers to come to a decision about His person and mission" (p. 230). Jeremias's (1963) great contribution was to illuminate the study of the Gospel parables by placing them in the setting of the life of Jesus. Even more valuable for our study, Jeremias's (1963) analysis

of first century Palestine pointed to several examples in the Gospel texts in which Jesus's listeners were very familiar with the characters and the contexts of the parables, particularly the nature of land ownership and landlords, and experiences surrounding meals and the Passover. This familiarity, of course, is central to some approaches to engaging one's listeners. Keener (2009) also highlighted that, on one hand, some of the phrasing attributed to Jesus is common to other early Jewish writing, like "To what shall I compare...?" (see, e.g., Lk 13:20). On the other hand, he concluded that the Gospel accounts of Jesus's parables are "a form distinctive to Jesus in our first-century Christian sources" (p. 186).

Several recent authors have catalogued, as did Stein (1994), some striking features of Jesus's teaching that make them so captivating, particularly the narrative parables (Hultgren, 2000; Snodgrass, 2008). These features include: directness to the audience, everyday subject matter, simplicity and symmetry, a focus on human characters, and unexpected behavior or endings. Miller (1981) offered a broad introduction to the scope of parable study, while also successfully capturing the engaging nature of the Gospel parables, which "stir the imagination and stimulate personal involvement and search" (1981, p. 6). More than mere storytelling, Jesus's parables call for a response from His listeners, often through rhetorical questions or by leaving open the conclusion of a parable (Schottroff, 2006). So, overall, Stein's (1994) key contribution was to thoroughly group and index the brilliant spectrum of Jesus's teaching techniques recounted in the canonical Gospels, and other authors expounded on the rich content of Jesus's parables.

### **Student Engagement**

While the variations are abundant, the most successful approaches to student engagement generate a transformation of the students' thinking. Jesuit education has been grounded in active student learning since the 1500s (International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education, ICAJE, 1993); however, 20th-century university instructors still struggle to transform their own assumptions about student learning in order to span the gap between the philosophy and practice of student engagement. The body of modern resources on student interest explores a number of theories and activities that suggest ways to improve students' learning, getting them involved by engaging their attention, their interest, their reflection, and their independent action (Barkley, 2010; Batten, 2005; Cranton, 2006; Hopper, 2010;

Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Meyers and Jones (1993), for example, have spoken of “active learning ... [which] substantially involves students with the course content through talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflecting” (p. 13). Researchers consistently report a strong correlation between increased student engagement and improved learning. Barkley et al. (2005) have summarized the biological link:

Neurologists and cognitive scientists agree that people quite literally “build” their own minds throughout life by actively constructing the mental structures that connect and organize isolated bits of information ... students must do the work of learning by actively making connections and organizing learning into meaningful concepts. (pp. 10–11)

In contrast, the transmittal model of learning configures the teacher as responsible for depositing knowledge *into* the students—an arrangement that posits students as empty vessels prepared for filling. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1993) critiqued this model, which he referred to as the “banking concept of education” (p. 53). Like John Dewey (2001), Freire (1993) opposed the notion that students were passive participants in the teaching-learning process. Instead, he proposed that instructors actively and purposefully engage students in a process that extended beyond the classroom into the larger world. Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995) have also advocated this approach of active learning, shifting a philosophy of providing instruction to one of producing learning, “recognizing that the chief agent in the process is the learner; thus, students must be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge” (p. 21). Gail Bush (2006) described this shift in a context of constructivism, which places responsibility for learning on the teacher as a facilitator and on the student as an active participant, so that “knowledge is constructed by the learner and developed through experience” (p. 16).

Conversely, the field of student engagement grounds teaching in the principle that knowledge is “constructed, discovered, transformed, and extended by students” (Johnson et al., 1998, p. 9). Whereas the old paradigm assumed a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, the new paradigm requires active participation from the student, a collaborative relationship between students and teachers, and joint responsibility for learning. Acknowledgment of the paradigm shift is evident in the work of theorists and practitioners exploring the changing nature of teaching (Freire, 1970; Johnson et al., 1998; Millis & Cottell, 1998). Ignatian pedagogy exemplifies the “new paradigm.”

The five steps of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm— Context, Experience, Reflection, Action, and Evaluation—guide students and educators in “learning and growth through encounters with truth and explorations of human meaning” (ICAJE, 1993, p. 10). Johnson et al. (1998) have offered a concise comparison of the teacher-centered (“old paradigm”) and student-centered (“new paradigm”) approaches by contrasting several key factors in the learning process (Table 1).

Table 1

The Changing Paradigm of Teaching

Factor	Old paradigm of teaching	New paradigm of teaching
Knowledge	Transferred from faculty to students	Jointly constructed by students and faculty
Students	Passive vessel to be filled by faculty's knowledge	Active constructor, discoverer, transformer of own knowledge
Nature of Learning	Learning is fundamentally individual; requires extrinsic motivation	Learning is fundamentally social; requires supportive environment/ community to unleash intrinsic motivation
Faculty Purpose	Classify and sort students	Develop students' competencies and talents
Relationships	Impersonal relationships among students and between faculty and students	Personal transaction among students and between faculty and students
Context	Competitive/Individualistic	Cooperative learning in classroom and cooperative teams among faculty.
Assumption	Any expert can teach	Teaching is complex and requires considerable training

Note. Adapted from Johnson et al., 1998, p. 6

### **Transformative Learning Process**

The contemporary theory of transformative learning helps us reflect on the overall process of Jesus's teaching. Specifically, the transformative theory of adult learning proposed by Mezirow (1978, 1990, 1991, 2000) provides one way of helping educators explore classroom applications and to better understand the effectiveness of the teaching methods demonstrated by Jesus.

The genuine transformation of a student's perspective requires a dramatic shift from formative, almost unconscious learning, to conscious, mature action (Mezirow, 1991). In childhood, interactions with parents, teachers, clergy, and peers create structures through which the child filters experiences and learning. These "uncritically assimilated habits...serve as schemes and as perceptual and interpretive codes in the construal of meaning" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 4). When that same student, as an adult, faces a situation that challenges those structures, the opportunity for transformation arises. Therefore, transformation typically begins when the learner experiences discomfort and seeks to resolve that dissonance through new insights or action. We saw Jesus allow His followers to experience this kind of discomfort in lessons that gave new meaning to familiar events, for example, in the stories of Jesus allowing crowds to grow hungry (Mt 15:32) and His disciples to fear the storm (Mt 8:23-26).

In transformative learning theory, a "disorienting dilemma" throws the individual into a state of disequilibrium when familiar beliefs are inadequate for dealing with new circumstances. Dramatic events such as loss of a job, a terminal diagnosis, or a marital separation may trigger a transformation of consciousness but so, too, can exposure to diverse cultures (Taylor, 1994), graphic museum displays (Herbers & Mullins-Nelson, 2009), and literature (Greene, 1990). Strong feelings of doubt, confusion, and anger may arise as the learner grapples with the awareness that former assumptions and beliefs cannot explain recent events. Mezirow (2000) identified a 10-phase process that ensues, including questioning assumptions, reflection, discussion, and ultimately taking action based on the new, more inclusive perspective.

### **Methodology**

As lay faculty at a Catholic university, we make no pretense to expertise in biblical scholarship. However, we recognize the importance of specifying that the "Jesus" in our title refers to Jesus of Nazareth as He is portrayed in the four Gospels of the Christian Bible (The New Revised Standard Version



Catholic Edition, 1989). We acknowledge the challenges associated with the quest for the historical Jesus and the complex process of transmission, interpretation, and composition that went into producing these ancient sources (Keener, 2009).

In our study, we began with an approach similar to that of Stein (1994) in order to catalogue the Gospel stories in which Jesus practiced some form of student engagement. To narrow the scope of our study, we concentrated on Jesus's direct interactions with people, in accounts where we could discern some evidence of a deliberate pedagogical exchange. Using this approach, we identified over 80 episodes in which the Gospel evangelist described Jesus employing what we would describe as student engagement. For each episode in which Jesus was teaching, we noted the setting, the audience, the lessons, and the techniques Jesus used to engage His listeners. This structure helped us to identify patterns in Jesus's approach to teaching, and allowed us to group those approaches and summarize His methods.

As an example, consider the call of the first disciples (Mt 4:18-19). The beaches of the Sea of Galilee provided the setting, and the students in this case were Peter and his brother Andrew. In His lesson, Jesus called these fishermen to follow Him, and taught them that He would make them fishers of people. To engage their attention and interest, Jesus met them at their place of labor and drew connections between their current profession and the call to follow Him. These parameters of setting, audience, lessons, and techniques allowed us to index the story so we could generalize our observations about Jesus's approaches to student engagement. A second example from the Gospel of Matthew is tabulated in Table 2.

Most of our examples come from the first three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called "Synoptic" because they present a common vision of Jesus. These Gospels carry the inherent bias of the author evangelists who were promoting Jesus's message, and are certainly subject to the complexity of transmission from first-hand observers of Jesus's teaching, to conveyance by oral tradition, and ultimately to written manuscript. At the same time, we gain confidence from many studies of subsequent historical documents that reinforce the authenticity of the general content and style of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus's teaching (Keener, 2009). We have generally taken Matthew as the lead text, without always citing the frequent parallels in the other two Synoptic Gospels, focusing, as Keener (2009) does, "largely on events and patterns of teaching rather than on details" (p. xxxii). On occasion, we have included incidents found only in John's Gospel.

Table 2

## Sample Structure of our Analysis of Jesus's Teaching Methods

Episode	Matt 3:13-17    The Baptism of Jesus
Setting	The Jordan River
Audience(s)	John the Baptist; others implied at the river
Lesson(s) Jesus taught	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus came to fulfill scriptural prophecies</li> <li>• Introduction of the Holy Trinity</li> </ul>
Engaging elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus came to the place where John was already preaching</li> <li>• Dramatic contradiction: God's divine Son asks for the human sign of baptism</li> <li>• Visible demonstration of Jesus's divinity</li> </ul>

We also recognize some challenges intrinsic to defining the setting of a given Gospel episode. For instance, a complete picture of the setting includes the audience; however, the crowds depicted in individual Gospel accounts are seldom described in detail (Jeremias, 1963). More importantly, Jeremias (1963) has pointed out the often conflicting accounts of the same parables written by the different Synoptic authors. For our purposes, we took the setting and audience to be the one offered by the referenced Gospel, and concentrated only on the pedagogical example offered in that particular account.

Our study is not an analysis of "parables" as found in extensive resources like Jeremias (1963) or Snodgrass (2008). Rather, we identify parables as one "single point of comparison" (Dodd, 1961, p. 7) that Jesus used to engage His listeners. From this perspective, we define "narratives" to encompass stories that have beginnings and endings, and with apparently fictional actors like the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep in search of the one that is lost (Lk 15:4-7), as well as explicit allegories in which Jesus defines each element of the story, like the Parable of the Sower (Lk 8:4-15). We define "analogies" to encompass comparisons of all kinds, broken down in other references (Snodgrass, 2008) into metaphor, "...beware of the yeast of the Pharisees..." (Mt 16:6); simile, "the kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed..." (Mk

4:30-31); and extended comparisons or *similitudes*, “You are the light of the world...” (Mt 5:14-16).

In our tabulation of Jesus’s teaching, we found some stories to be more difficult to catalog than others, like Matthew’s narrative of the Sermon on the Mount, which did not describe any interaction with the crowds, so there was no obvious *evidence* of successful student engagement (Mt 5-7). However, we were able to break down these passages to identify distinct approaches that we could generalize. This layer of cataloging allowed us to describe Jesus’s approach to instruction in sufficient detail to contribute to the groupings we will describe shortly.

Finally, the structure of our study had to address how Jesus’s miraculous healings attracted people’s attention. Although there is scarce Gospel evidence of how people responded to Jesus’s narratives and analogies, many passages describe how individuals responded to Jesus’s forgiveness and healing—most often by sharing their encounter with others or by following Jesus themselves. For instance, when Jesus healed the paralytic brought in on a stretcher, “...the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God” (Mt 9:1-8). Many miracles included in the Gospel accounts often have no apparent pedagogy; our study did not include those examples. We did include cases in which Jesus attempted to present an obvious lesson through the demonstration of His divine power.

Overall, this structured study helped us to identify patterns in Jesus’s approach to teaching, such as parable narratives, question and answer, case study, and critical thinking. It could be argued, certainly, that the message of salvation itself sufficed to engage Jesus’s listeners. However, to generalize Jesus’s teachings in ways we can apply across diverse fields, we focused our attention on the methods Jesus demonstrated rather than on His saving message. One realization that emerged from our approach was the connection of this process to current research in transformative learning.

### Findings—Patterns in Jesus’s Approach to Student Engagement

An examination of the Gospels led us to a deeper understanding of the practices Jesus exemplified that can be associated with the “new paradigm” and to student-centered practices that inspire individual transformation. In our discussion that follows, we group the scripture stories according to Jesus’s method, and we include Bible references that illustrate each approach. The overall structure of this section follows the three natural groupings we found in Jesus’s teaching methods: His engaging use of narratives and analogies; other methods He employed, such as the choice of setting, question-and-an-

swer, and case study; and the transformative process He modeled. The manuscript then moves from specific examples of Jesus's methods to the process of how Jesus's teaching called His listeners to personal transformation.

### **Jesus's Engaging Use of Narratives and Analogies**

We found that, among all the teaching methods documented in the Gospels, Jesus most often used narratives and analogies. By employing these techniques, Jesus engaged people's attention, framing His lessons with topics and settings familiar to them (Keener, 2009). As He drew from His students' common experiences, Jesus built an instant relationship with His listeners and set the stage for them to make connections to their prior knowledge and to discover new lessons in the context of otherwise familiar scenarios. In Matthew 20, for instance, Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a story in which workers are invited to serve on a vineyard at various points in a day—a familiar circumstance to His typically agrarian listeners—but all the workers end up receiving the same wage. Through this allegory, Jesus illustrated God's generosity, while also offering a caution about the importance of humility and service, whereby "...the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Mt 20:16)

The groupings in Table 3 show the many areas from which Jesus made concrete connections with the life experience of the learners and with topics familiar to the audience. We offer the list, in part, to illustrate the broad spectrum of Jesus's narratives and analogies. Later, we refer back to these groups as a potential starting point to teach storytelling to modern instructors.

In Jesus's culture of oral instruction, one might regard His general use of narratives and comparisons as unremarkable (Keener, 2009). Especially because the Gospels present only limited details of the responses of Jesus's listeners, it would be difficult to isolate His use of these literary forms as a primary cause for audience engagement. However, the Gospels do include many instances in which Jesus engaged His listeners with captivating stories in which He encouraged even deeper reflection by adding layers of contrast and contradiction. Keener (2009), in particular, concluded that Jesus's skillful use of comparison had no parallel in documents produced before He lived, and was unmatched even in rabbinical writings that followed. Reid (2001) summarized succinctly, "In His parables, Jesus always begins with the familiar. The images and situations He painted in His stories were from the fabric of the daily life of His audience" (p.1). However, the parables did not linger at this level of the familiar and the comfortable.

Table 3

Sampling of Jesus's Connections to Familiar Experiences

Experience	Narratives (n) and Analogies (a)	Chapter/Verse
The body, senses, and life	flavor of salt (a)	Mt 5:13
	burying the dead (a)	Mt 8:22
	darkness and light (a)	Mt 10:27
	hairs on your head (a)	Mt 10:30
	losing life for Jesus's sake (a)	Mt 10:39
	the mouth (a)	Mt 15:17-18
	the eye (a)	Mt 18:9
	blindness and sight (a)	Jn 9:1-41
Nature and farming	foxes and birds (a)	Mt 8:20
	laborers for the harvest (a)	Mt 9:37-38
	lost sheep of Israel (a)	Mt 10:6
	lightness of Jesus's yoke (a)	Mt 11:30
	fruit of a tree (a)	Mt 12:33
	what God plants (a)	Mt 15:13
	mustard seed (a)	Mt 17:20
	camel passing through the eye of a needle (a)	Mt 19:24
	mustard seed / bush (n)	Lk 13:18-19
	the good shepherd (n)	Lk 15:4-7
Possessions and ownership	laborer deserves his keep (a)	Mt 10:10
	more given to those who already have (a)	Mt 13:12
	woman seeking lost coin (n)	Lk 15:8-10
Home, family, and work	new cloth, old cloak (n)	Mt 9:16
	new wine, old wineskins (n)	Mt 9:17
	children who would not dance (a)	Mt 11:16-17
	safety of man's home (a)	Mt 12:29
	fishers of people (a)	Mk 1:17
	sower scattering seed (n)	Mk 4:26-29
	parents who provide (a)	Lk 11:11-13
	prodigal son (n)	Lk 15:11-32
	family apprenticeship (a)	Jn 5:19-20

Instead, “they were startling and confusing, usually having unexpected twists that left the hearer pondering what the story meant and what it demanded” (Reid, 2001, p. 7). Jesus’s use of contrast and contradiction thus engaged His listeners at deeper levels than what He might have reached through simple lecture. For instance, when questioned how to judge a case of divorce, Jesus contrasted Moses’s guidance and His own new covenant (Mk 10:2-12). He illustrated the proper attitude of prayer by contrasting the behavior of the self-absorbed Pharisee and the humble tax collector (Lk 18:9-14). In another memorable story in which Jesus forgave a woman caught in adultery, He silenced the mob by inviting anyone without sin to cast the first stone (Jn 8:3-11). These episodes illustrate how Jesus’s piercing use of contrast challenged His listeners to move beyond a simple dualistic world view of reward and punishment.

In modern times, numerous researchers have sought to add to our understanding of how to expand the intellectual and ethical perspective of college students in a comparable way. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), in their comprehensive review of the impact of college on student development, analyzed prevailing theories of cognitive development. In sum, they observed that “the [learner’s] progression is invariably toward greater differentiation and complexity accompanied by greater integration” (p. 48). The use of contrasts, as illustrated by Jesus, is a powerful way to prompt a student’s openness to new ideas, a transformational theme we discuss further in our third main section.

### **Other Engaging Methods in Jesus’s Teaching**

**Setting.** Another approach Jesus used to engage attention was to carefully select the content to fit the context for His lesson. In some cases, He led His listeners to an isolated place, as when He commissioned the 12 Apostles (Mk 3:13), or several times when He led large crowds up to a mountain or away to a seashore (Mt 5-7, Mt 8:18). Stein (1994) made a similar observation, noting how Jesus did not teach strictly in synagogues like the rabbis of His time, but often taught in open fields and the countryside. Later in His ministry, Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem while visiting the temple area with His disciples (Mt 24:1-2).

We find additional detail in several episodes in which Jesus chose His setting by going out to engage people where they lived and worked. For instance, when He meets John baptizing at the river, we see John engaged both in Jesus’s lesson and in His baptism (Mt 3:13-16). In another episode soon afterward, Jesus summoned His disciples directly from their boats, and the

Gospels convey an image of the nearly instant response to Jesus's call. Luke 5, for example, describes Jesus's command to Simon to head out for deeper water, even though Simon complained of a fruitless night of fishing. When Simon finally conceded to following Jesus's instructions, "...he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken....When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him" (Lk 5:9-11). Even after His resurrection, rather than seeking them at their homes or synagogues, Jesus returned to the Apostles' workplace at the shore, where He instructed them to cast their nets on the other side of their boats until they came ashore and recognized Him again (Jn 21:1-14).

**Visual aids.** Jesus also selected specific visual aids for His teaching. When challenged about whether to pay taxes, He began the lesson by asking to see a sample coin (Mt 22:15-22). In another well-known lesson in which Jesus encouraged us to be childlike in our faith, He invited a child to come to Him (Mt 18:2). In current teaching practice, of course, faculty can promote student interest by bringing physical or photographic artifacts to the class, or accessing a wide variety of interactive network resources.

**Timing.** In addition to considering the location of His instructional setting, Jesus was deliberate in His timing, frequently allowing His students to grow uncomfortable before He delivered His lesson. This kind of experience—sometimes truly visceral—serves to engage the listener in a very personal way. When teaching on the mountainsides, for instance, Jesus waited until the crowds grew hungry, then He fed them and continued His lesson (Mt 15:32). When His disciples sailed off at night, Jesus allowed them to be tossed by the storm before He rescued them (Mt 8:23-26). In more modern terms, Mezirow (1991, 2000) has described the disorienting dilemma as an event that challenges the competencies and existing mental models of the learner, and may serve as a catalyst for transformative learning. We would describe Jesus in these episodes as creating just enough cognitive or physical dissonance to ready His students to be open to learning.

**Questioning.** In the best tradition of teachers of all eras, but certainly typical of the rabbinical traditions of His time, Jesus often used exchanges of questions and answers to lead His listeners to reflect and construct their own lessons (Keener, 2009). When two blind men asked Jesus for healing, He first probed the strength of their faith (Mt 9:27-28). Jesus took a similar opportunity to teach a crowd about John the Baptist through a series of questions, beginning with, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" (Mt 11:7-8). On the road to Emmaus, Jesus engaged two disciples by

inquiring about the prophecies and events surrounding His life and crucifixion (Lk 24:13-20). After His resurrection, Jesus began His commissioning of Peter by asking, "...do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:15-19). Through the give and take documented in the Gospels, we see clear evidence of Jesus's listeners engaged in their lessons, developing new insights together with the Master Teacher.

We also see Jesus employ pointed questions to challenge the assumptions of his learners. When His listeners were confused or misled, Jesus posed piercing questions that allowed Him to counter their faulty logic. For example, when His expulsion of demons caused some to question His divinity, Jesus pointed out the contradictory prospect of Satan driving out Satan (Mt 12:26). Even among His disciples, Jesus was pressed by Peter to define limits on how forgiving we must be. Jesus replied abruptly, to show Peter the flaw in his reasoning, that if one's brother sins against him, one must forgive him "...not seven times but seventy-seven times." Jesus then illustrated the consequences of the message with a narrative of a servant, forgiven a large debt, who refused to forgive a much smaller matter with a fellow servant (Mt 18:21-35). Jesus took a comparable approach when He encountered His disciples arguing about who would be greatest in the Kingdom, and instructed them that anyone who wishes to be first must become the servant of all (Mk 9:33-35).

When faced with trick questions intended as traps, Jesus countered with questions of His own. Some chief priests who challenged Jesus's authority were met with an intractable dilemma when Jesus responded, "Where was John's baptism from? Was it of human or of heavenly origin?" (Mt 21:23-27). Jesus's questions completely stymied His antagonizers. In another episode, the emissaries of the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus on a question of taxes; Jesus replied by requesting a coin and asking, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" (Mt 22:15-22). The give-and-take with His hostile listeners allowed Jesus to turn the tables on His challengers. To respond to trick questions about the sanctity of marriage, Jesus first asked the crowd to recall what Moses prescribed (Mk 10:2-12). Once the crowd was engaged by recalling Moses's commands, Jesus shared His more profound guidance: that once a man and woman are married, "...what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mk 10:9).

Jesus often replied to questions by offering evidence and letting His listeners draw their own conclusions. When John's disciples came to see if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus did not reply directly. Instead, He presented the evi-



dence of His ministry and led them to use their own judgment (Mt 11:2-6). Jesus applied this approach even with His own disciples. On a journey across the sea, Jesus tried to caution His disciples about the misguided teachings of the Pharisees, using an analogy of leaven and bread. His disciples completely missed the point, inaccurately concluding that Jesus was concerned "...because [they had] brought no bread" (Mt 16:5-7). So Jesus reframed the lesson by reminding them of their previous experiences of collecting the leftovers after miraculously feeding crowds of thousands, leading the disciples to understand that He was cautioning them about the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:11-12).

**Case studies.** As is now common practice in teaching through case studies, Jesus used the experiences of one individual as a catalyst for critical thinking by others. Case studies used in many fields use real-world examples, drawn from the narratives of practitioners, to challenge student thinking and force learners to make a decision. Their engagement is complex, however, because the story is not finished and multiple endings are possible. To encourage His listeners to reflect more deeply on a message, Jesus often presented case studies, sometimes taking advantage of teaching moments in apparently impromptu settings. Not surprisingly, some of these stories are among the most memorable in the Bible. When Jesus saw a poor widow contribute two small coins to the treasury, He called His disciples over to explain the magnitude of her sacrifice (Mk 12:41-44). When Jesus explained to a scholar that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, the scholar further challenged, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the well-known example of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). At an event at which Jesus observed dinner guests scrambling for seats of honor, He told a story highlighting that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while the humble will be exalted (Lk 14:7-14). When Jesus encountered a man born blind, the process of the man's healing provided Jesus a context for several lessons: correcting the misconception that disabilities were consequences of a family's sin, the correctness of healing on the Sabbath, and the connection between faith and forgiveness (Jn 9: 1-41).

**Critical thinking.** Jesus forced His disciples to think critically by allowing them to fail. In the well-known story in which Jesus walked on the stormy water, He gave Peter a chance to exercise his faith by following Jesus's example (Mt 14:29-31) and intervened when Peter was in over his head. In addition, Jesus challenged his followers to use critical thinking to solve problems associated with preaching and teaching. In another well-known incident,

before Jesus miraculously fed an enormous crowd, He first challenged His disciples, “Give them some food yourselves” (Mk 6:37).

**Exemplary teaching.** In the most active form of engagement, Jesus set the ultimate example for how to live a life of service, instructing His followers to practice likewise. Modern student engagement expresses this approach in terms of social justice, service learning, and experiential learning. In His public ministry, Jesus preached constantly, traveling tirelessly from place to place on foot as He attracted disciples by His example and His message (Mt 9:35). His focus on action once led Jesus to allow His disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath in sight of the Pharisees. The Pharisees’ reactions ended in a debate on the priority of social justice over Sabbath traditions (Mt 12:1-8). In a well-known act of social justice with an embedded lesson, Jesus cleansed the Jerusalem temple of the money changers and sellers (Mt 21:12-17). Jesus’s example for ministry also included constant outreach to those who were marginalized, as He dined regularly with outcasts and sinners (Mt 9:10).

Far more than a master storyteller, then, Jesus demonstrated numerous ways to engage His students on multiple levels. His choice of setting and timing served to engage peoples’ attention, especially when He sought to encounter them where they lived and worked. He elicited more intense responses when He allowed His students to experience some discomfort or even failure. Jesus led His students to deeper reflection through questions and answers, particularly in debate with skeptical or hostile audiences. Finally, Jesus provided diverse case studies to stimulate His students’ critical thinking, and He engaged His students in active learning through opportunities for service and practice. The authors’ recognition of these specific techniques led to the exploration of the overall teaching process Jesus employed.

### **The Transformative Process of Jesus’s Teaching**

Jesus was leading His followers to a kingdom that required new ways of thinking and acting. He faced enormous resistance because He challenged basic assumptions that were culturally engrained (Spear, 2005; Wanak, 2009). In that context, Jesus epitomized successful student engagement by crafting stories that challenged His listeners’ cultural assumptions while calling them to explore new ideas. Shaw (1999) described how “stories that are communicated well invite learners into a transformative realm in which old ways of knowing may be opened up to new possibilities” (p. 5).

Jesus presented disorienting dilemmas in His analogies and parables, which began with the familiar and then took a radical turn (Reid, 2001).

Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount includes a memorable lesson about retaliation in which Jesus confronted the tradition of "an eye for an eye" and directed us instead that "...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also..." (Mt 5:38-39). In another part of the same collection of teachings, Jesus recalled the commandment against adultery, adding the more castigatory warning that "...everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28). Jesus concluded with the unforgettable twist, "...if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Mt 5:27-30).

In this general approach to teaching, the listener is likely more open to exploring controversial themes because the story appears to be about other people (Shaw, 1999). This distance allows the listener to see more clearly what is right. However, this clarity often clashes with the learner's existing assumptions. "By shattering the structures of our accepted world, parables remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God" (Reid, 2001, p. 8). Wanak (2009), for instance, cited the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37) as a prime example of the radical reflection Jesus asked of His listeners. When a lawyer asked what it means to love "your neighbor as yourself," Jesus responded with a parable, making a foreigner, a Samaritan, the hero of the story, rather than the priest or Levite. The narrow view of "neighbor" and the associated stereotypes were thus brought into question. Jesus concluded the story by asking, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" The answer was obvious, and was followed by a call for action, "Go and do likewise."

Bergman (2011) described in rich detail the transformation of students who experienced an encounter with the social realities of the poor through an immersion program in Haiti. The transformation process began with moral anguish when students opened their eyes (and hearts) to the pain and suffering of the Haitian people. Bergman (2011) concluded:

Research on this "Semestre Dominicano" suggests that such an educational program, with its emphasis on personal encounter with the poor as a problem-posing insertion into social reality, provides one very *promising* model by which to foster in college students a transformation of moral perspective and a commitment to build a more just world. (p. 75)

We found, then, that Jesus modeled steps that lead to transformational learning: a disorienting dilemma, questioning assumptions, reflection, and

a call to action. This model is congruent with Ignatian Pedagogy (Bergman, 2009) as well as with Johnson et al.'s (1998) factors of teaching (Table 1). Successful transformational learning relies on one additional key ingredient. To endure the personal risk of transformational learning, the willingness of students to remain engaged depends on the nature of their relationship with the teacher and among peers (Cranton, 2006; Taylor, 1994). Jesus clearly built these relationships in an apostolic ministry that has endured millennia since His resurrection. Thus, the Gospels clearly depict a transformative learning process underlying Jesus's engaging content and methods.

Allowing us to consider the *effectiveness* of Jesus's student engagement, some Gospel accounts include rare comments that illustrate some measure of the response of Jesus's listeners. Stein (1994), for instance, pointed to Mark 4:1, in which Jesus attracted a crowd so large that He could only continue teaching by entering a boat and moving out onto the Sea of Galilee. Similarly, the Gospel of Mark described Jesus moved to pity for a vast crowd that ended up spending the entire day with Him in a deserted place until very late when there is no chance for them to eat, until Jesus feeds them after blessing the five loaves and two fish (Mk 6:34-44). Therefore, at the most basic level, we see that Jesus captured sufficient attention and interest of crowds of thousands for them to follow Him to distant mountainsides, and endure long evenings just to listen to His teaching (Mt 5; Mt 8:1; Mk 6:34-36).

On a deeper level, we find evidence that Jesus led His listeners to actively reflect on His message, as He did with the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life (Mt 19:16-30). We note that Jesus engaged the antagonistic Scribes and Pharisees in other ways, often through debate, as in their dispute about the lawfulness of divorce (Mk 10:2-12). In a more dynamic physical way, Jesus engaged the active commitment of His disciples in the initial call of the 12 Apostles (Mk 1:16-20) and in the Apostles' first mission assignment from Jesus (Mt 10:5-42). In the latter example, Jesus gave them specific instructions on where to go, how to respond to friendly or hostile welcome, how to preach, what to expect, and how to remain encouraged in the face of adversity.

As one may see from this brief study of Jesus's process, a caveat for employing the transformative process is that the learners might vehemently resist the learning, especially in the initial stages. There are certainly Gospel stories in which the reactions of Jesus's listeners would not be considered successful teacher-student encounters. Early in Mark, for instance, Jesus rebuffed a challenge by the Pharisees and healed a man's withered hand on the

Sabbath. In response to the lesson, the “Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mk 3:6). Even more vividly, a moving passage in Luke depicted Jesus, explaining His fulfillment of prophecy in a synagogue in His native Nazareth, where His listeners “...were filled with rage...and led Him to the brow of the hill...so that they might hurl Him off the cliff” (Lk 4:28-29). In these contexts, we noted that while Jesus successfully engaged His listeners, they adamantly rejected His message.

### Applications

In our study of Jesus’s instructional techniques, we found the teacher’s role to be essential in promoting student engagement. Jesus epitomized what it means to be an engaging teacher; the body of the narrative above summarized our findings of “what Jesus taught us” about student engagement. Our study of those methods pointed to the following practices that we recommend to faculty as valuable elements in their repertoire of student engagement techniques, and to academic administrators as meaningful areas in which to encourage faculty development.

### Narratives and Analogies

Although this practice stands out as the primary strength in Jesus’s teaching, storytelling is not widely addressed in the current literature on student engagement. De Mello and Dych (1999) have advocated teaching exclusively through stories and parables. They argued, in fact, that truth could be taught no other way, as “the shortest distance between a human being and truth is a story” (De Mello & Dych 1999, p. 9). De Mello (1984, 1988) illustrated this principle in his many collections of spiritual lessons and exercises. Shaw (1999) pointed out that stories can “touch, challenge and change learners on cognitive, affective and behavioral levels” (p. x) because they touch the human psyche. A contributing factor is the almost universal receptiveness to a good story. Shaw (1999) described the daunting task of making an announcement before a mandatory college chapel service. As expected, students were paying little attention to her. She stopped in midmessage and slowly began again, “Once upon a time...” and the room fell silent. Her book *Storytelling in Religious Education* has specific how-to suggestions for faculty that can be adapted across disciplines.

Unfortunately, this skill appears difficult to teach. Not everyone is a natural storyteller, and most of us can recall at least one professor who seemed in-

capable of spinning a worthy yarn. What can be done to help someone learn to become a storyteller? Hopper (2009) has suggested that we can begin by telling someone *else's* stories. We just need to retell those stories in a way that engages our students.

Another practical approach for the nonstoryteller is to use stories found in literature. Coles (1990) described the use of poems and works of literature to help medical students hear the perspective of patients. He taught future psychiatrists at Harvard about the anguish of depression and suicidal ideation using the works of writers struggling with mental illness. It was Coles's (1990) premise that stories are an effective way to teach and to spark the moral imagination. Greene (1995) concurred that "imagination makes empathy possible" and that stories help us to "look in some manner through strangers' eyes and hear through their ears" (p. 3).

A catalyst Shaw (1999) has recommended for teachers is to ask what will resonate with the life experience of their students. Jesus accomplished did so by tailoring His stories to the lives of His followers. The categories of topics we observed in Jesus's parables (Table 3) suggest some specific starting places to identify topics for stories that might engage our own students: the body and senses, nature, possessions, home, family, and work. By finding stories from those topic areas, nonstorytellers have a greater chance of making connections with ideas already familiar to their students.

### **Setting Design**

Faculty can incorporate approaches similar to those modeled by Jesus by choosing a setting that may enhance engagement as learners are led into new and unfamiliar contexts. Instruction can be designed to incorporate field experiences, to conduct off-campus service projects, to gather in symbolic places, or simply to vary the location of class meetings. Additionally, the authors' instructional experiences have highlighted the importance of meeting our millennial students "where they are" in terms of their familiarity with technology, their lack of confidence with interpersonal exchange, and their evolving learning styles.

### **Visual and Creative Arts**

Jesus provided many examples of how to use visuals to engage His students. The availability of media and technology certainly expands the possibilities for modern instructors. Moore (2009), for instance, used video and photo references in class to make physical landmarks and monuments ac-

cessible to students. This allowed her to exhibit relevant physical artifacts, to illustrate best practices, and to offer samples that students could evaluate and analyze. In another example, Rembrandt's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* was a catalyst for Nouwen's (1992) examination of that parable. The perspective of the artist stirred deep reflection for a priest moved by the subtle details found in the setting, the relationships, the postures, and even the placement of hands.

Martin (2007) has described the history of Jesuit theatre, in which as early as the founding of the Jesuits in 1540, "Jesuits specifically began producing plays and stage pieces as a means of educating children" (p. 120). Some of the lavish productions involved entire towns. Martin (2007) concluded, "Not surprisingly, these plays had a powerful effect on the students at the Jesuit schools" (p. 123).

On a somewhat smaller scale, instructors can also engage their students with some simple applications of in-class theater. For instance, a primary document can come alive in the contemporary classroom when students are invited to form groups to read aloud or even act out the content. One of the authors has employed this method by using quotations from Rosa Parks and Myles Horton, founder of Highlander Folk School. Graduate students and undergraduates alike were surprised to learn of Parks's activism and her involvement with Highlander prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Kohl, 2007; Parks, 1992). Readings taken from Parks's own words led to rich discussions of civil rights issues of the past and present. These methods can be as simple as staging a reading or as messy as conducting a student rendition of the theater of the oppressed.

### Questioning

Jesus asked memorable and effective questions. In contrast, Wanak (2009) observed that college teachers "spend a great deal of time on proclamation and not enough time raising questions" (p. 179). He categorized Jesus's questions: for focus and clarification (Mt 20:32; Mk 5:30, Lk 22:48), to express deep disappointment (Mt 17:17; Mt 26:40), to challenge tradition and authority (Lk 14:3; Mk 3:4), and to challenge values (Mt 16:26; Lk 24:26). A good question will move the student to reflect critically, to consider other views, or to move to another level of response and judgment. Batten (2005) and Wanak (2009) asked students to examine how the community responds to contemporary issues. A teacher might also ask, "How does this story apply to our own community?" Questions can also focus on deeper issues, such as, "What are the barriers to change?"

Jesus asked His followers to make up their own minds. We can create a classroom that encourages students to do the same. We can ask, “What is the role of the university in bringing change to this social condition?”, “What is the role of the church?”, or “What is our role in this issue?” One simple question that has stimulated action and activated faith in the authors’ university community is “What can we do to apply principles of Catholic Social teaching in our own practice?”

In *A Jesuit Off-Broadway: Center Stage with Jesus, Judas and Life’s Big Questions*, Martin (2007) described his collaboration with members of the cast and producers in a play about Judas Iscariot. Questions from the cast led to research, reflection, and dialogue about topics ranging from the lives of the saints to the church’s position on despair. The rational discourse experienced by Martin (2007) and his cast can be replicated in a college classroom, if students are encouraged to raise questions, knowing that the professor will delve into research to bring resources for discussion of contemporary issues. Martin (2007), like Ignatius, provided a model for a teacher willing to act as a guide or consultant. For instructors, this role requires a shift from the habit of merely giving answers based on our expertise and knowledge, to fostering soul-searching and deeper exploration of student perspectives.

We can look to Jesus’s use of counter-questions to respond constructively to students who might be skeptical, overtly antagonistic, or simply lost on a topic. The use of convergent and divergent questioning helps the learner process information and allows the teacher to facilitate learning. Convergent questions are narrow in scope and have an anticipated response. Such questions are ideal in assessing basic information about a topic. Divergent questions do not have an “approved” correct answer as they are open-ended. “To respond to a divergent question, a student must be able to recall some information from memory, but must apply that knowledge and other knowledge to explain, extrapolate or further analyze a topic, situation or problem” (McComas & Abraham, 2004, p. 2). Divergent questions require higher-order processing and build on lower-level thinking to extend student learning as a process—student-constructed rather than teacher-provided.

### **Case Studies**

As Jesus modeled in His use of case studies, learning experiences become more memorable as students are immersed in the process, not just the product, of learning. To this end, teachers must construct what Bain (2004) referred to as a “natural critical learning environment,” in which individuals



learn by “confronting...authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality” (p. 18). The students’ critical thinking that emerges from this process, in the ideal, promotes openness to other points of view. Case studies, in particular, involve students in reflection and discussions “that call for higher-order levels of reasoning, such as analyzing situations, forming judgments, and evaluating solutions” (Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 103).

### **Experiential Learning and Applied Teaching**

In modern settings, many university instructors teach concepts of social justice in comparable ways by incorporating service learning into their courses. At the authors’ campus, for instance, students are invited to “Meet the Mission” in a day of off-campus service experiences, side by side with university faculty members. Batten (2005) took this approach one step further, implementing service learning to teach *about* Jesus. Her course required each student to serve 16 to 20 hours at a site of his or her choice, mostly in small groups. Students journaled the history of the site, their specific sensory observations and feelings, and reflected on the people they served. The impact of her approach was profound. As Batten (2005) explained:

It provided a way for students ... to reflect more neutrally upon what they perceived to be threatening ideas about the Bible and Jesus while it engaged the suspicious and even anti-religious students such that they were willing to consider the study of the historical Jesus as a worthwhile endeavor just as the lives of Muhammad, Abraham Lincoln, or Emma Goldman are worth studying. (p. 107)

### **Recommendations**

It is important to note that Jesus did not consistently use all of the student engagement methods for each learning experience. Rather, Jesus, as a Master Teacher, selected which methods would be most effective for both the learner and the context. He taught by using different strategies to meet the needs of his “students.” This type of teaching requires practice and continuing professional development.

Administrative acknowledgement of the importance of faculty development is critical. Faculty need time, training, and opportunities for collaboration as they engage in reflection on teaching practices. It is a daunting task

to align mission and instructional practices. Therefore, development opportunities must—like classroom instruction—be multi-faceted, tailored to the context and audience, and ongoing.

Our comparison of Jesus's teaching and modern student engagement pointed to valuable approaches that can be added to the classroom repertoire. Storytelling, in particular, stood out as a powerful approach that Jesus demonstrated, and which is not consistently emphasized in modern resources on student engagement. On the other hand, some pedagogical approaches, such as collaborative and cooperative learning, are not apparent in the Gospels. Future research could explore the body of contemporary techniques that do not seem to have any parallel in the Gospel accounts of Jesus's teaching.

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*Dr. Glenn James just finished his 10th year at UIW and now serves as accreditation liaison. He hopes to return to the classroom soon and bring more storytelling to math classes. Correspondence regarding this article can be directed to Dr. James at [gjames@uiwtx.edu](mailto:gjames@uiwtx.edu)*

*Dr. Elda Martinez is a Professor of Education and serves as the Director of Teacher Education at the University of the Incarnate Word. She is deeply committed to learning with her students as she teaches.*

*Dr. Sharon Herbers, Associate Professor at the University of the Incarnate Word, engages graduate students in community-based projects to apply theory to practice. Creativity, imagination, and contemplative practice are areas of special interest for research and professional development (of self and for other adult learners).*