

A Community of Scholars in the Christian Formation and Ministry Department at Wheaton College

by Donald Ratcliff, Ph.D.

I am impressed with the biblical account of Abraham, who is the first person in the Bible to be called a “prophet” (Gen. 20:7). As the first prophet he had to learn that role by trial and error, as he had no real role model to follow. Over time, and with several major failures, he was socialized into the prophetic role by God, so that he could do a prophet’s tasks (such as his intercession for Sodom and his nephew Lot).

Part of the graduate school experience is to be socialized into a community of scholars (some might even say “the” community of scholars). You are not just a student; you are a scholar-in-the-making. Library research papers, lectures, and other experiences are intended to shape you into a person who looks at the world and yourself differently from the average person. The goal for our department is that you become a Christian scholar, one who affirms the value of scholarship and research, as well as viewing these from a distinctly Christian perspective.

In the early years of the university, and in some areas of the world yet today, a Masters degree is considered to reflect mastery of your discipline—thus the name “Masters.” With the masters degree you could begin teaching at the college level, as traditionally a doctorate was optional and fairly rare. In England yet today a Masters degree prepares the student to be a full-time lecturer in the university. Even the United States implies a high level of scholarship in Masters level classes, as accrediting associations require 18 graduate hours in a given subject area to be able to teach that subject to undergraduates.

Mastery is accomplished in the Christian Formation and Ministry program through coursework, field experiences, and a capstone course. The program reflects the traditional requirements for a Masters degree of a comprehensive exam—indicating a mastery of the entire discipline of Christian Formation and Ministry—and a capstone project—a unique contribution to the discipline.

One aspect of the socialization process for budding education scholars is to make class presentations and enter into discussions in and out of class. Presentations and discussion provide opportunities for sharing with peers, who are also being socialized into scholars. For most classes, most of the learning is primarily directed by instructors, yet there is also a place for testing one’s skills in the university community by in-class activities. Gradually, over time—and especially if you continue on beyond the Masters level—peers come to inform and teach almost as much as the professors. That is because peers have valuable insights from their readings, classes, and lived experience that may even exceed those of the professors. As one reflects and tests one’s skills in presentations and discussions, the degree of scholarship increases incrementally.

Sometimes it is said that presentations and discussion are a pooling of ignorance. That can happen when a professor does not intervene appropriately, kindly making corrections

and filling in missing details in a student presentation. But that does not devalue the importance of peer involvement, as people try out their knowledge and share resources that others may need. I recall vividly one class in my graduate work in which the teacher came to a topic about which I obviously knew more than others in the class, including the professor. Since he realized this, he asked me to teach that subject during the class. I gladly took up the task, because I realized it was appropriate. I don't think the students in the class were getting "second best" by hearing from one of their peers. I had become enough of a scholar in that area to do the needed teaching (interestingly, that teacher later co-chaired my doctoral committee, and gave me great latitude in my research, apparently reflecting the degree of scholarship acquired). On a smaller scale, class presentations and discussions can be a forum to have one's scholarship tested. We can learn much from peers who have worked hard and learned about a specific topic.

I realize this is a process that can be abused. I have heard horror stories about teachers who essentially vacated their leadership role by having students discuss with one another for entire class periods. If peers teach more than the professor, something is probably wrong. But we should hear peer voices, hear their budding expertise, and perhaps even take a few notes, especially when they mention important resources with which we are not familiar. It will not be long before you hear some of them present at conferences, and see a room full of people taking notes on what they say. You may also be one of the presenters. But for now, they--like you--are in the process of becoming Christian scholars, and thus we need to take the potential learning that can result from discussions and presentations very seriously.