

Christopher Richmann: Welcome to Professors Talk Pedagogy of podcasts from the Academy for Teaching and Learning at Baylor University. I'm your host, Christopher Richmann. Professors Talk Pedagogy presents discussions with great professors about pedagogy, curriculum and learning in order to propel the virtuous cycle of teaching. As we frankly and critically investigate our teaching, we opened new lines of inquiry. We engage in conversation with colleagues and we attune to students' experiences, all of which not only improves our teaching, but enriches and motivates ongoing investigation. And so the cycle continues.

Today, our guest is Dr. Mikeal Parsons, professor and Macon Chair in religion at Baylor University. Dr. Parsons is a New Testament scholar specializing in the Gospels and the Book of Acts through the lens of rhetoric and literary criticism. Author and/or editor of over 30 books, Dr. Parsons has served as co-director of a Wabash grant for graduate students teaching. And more recently Dr. Parsons as a co-principle investigator on another Wabash funded teaching project focusing on pedagogical practices and faith traditions. We are delighted to have Dr. Parsons on the show to discuss graduate student training and teaching, the implications of religious backgrounds for teaching and much more.

Well, Mikeal Parsons, thank you for joining the show today.

Mikeal Parsons: My pleasure.

CR: As our listeners would have heard in the introduction for this show, You are, I think by most accounts, a pretty accomplished scholar in your field of New Testament studies and ancient literature. But it is more rare for someone of that level of accomplishment to be so invested in teaching. So I'm just curious, how did you begin to get more interested in teaching and training future teachers and looking at teaching from a more critical perspective.

MP: Well, that's a good question. When I came to Baylor in 1986, I was a lecturer and I was teaching four sections of survey classes with 85 students each. So 300-340 students per semester. And I did that for three years while I was also trying to revise my dissertation for publication in the first year. So I really didn't have a lot of time to think about teaching.

CR: Sure.

MP: I was writing lectures, giving lectures, revising lectures, and then spare time trying to clean up my first book. But at the end of my third year, I took what was then called the Summer Teaching Institute, which was the predecessor to whatever it's called now—

CR: Summer Faculty Institute

MP: And two Baylor legends, Tom Hanks and Bob Baird were the leaders of that. And that was the first time I'd ever heard anything about active learning and about teaching from the concrete to the abstract. And we did teaching demos. And so that got me interested in pedagogy and becoming better at what I was spending a lot of my time doing. And yeah, so it launched from there.

CR: Did you have any experience as a graduate student in teaching or in teacher training?

MP: We had no teacher training program in my graduate program. But we were, New Testament students were allowed to teach Greek, what we call baby Greek, which I did my last year while I was writing my dissertation. So I taught a section of introductory Greek in the fall and spring semesters of my last year of graduate work. And then I stayed and taught as a full-time instructor for a year before I came to Baylor. But we took a seminar in higher education, but there was really very little focus on teacher training or pedagogy or anything like that. At the time, which I think was pretty typical, right? Of graduate schools in early and mid eighties.

CR: So after having a bit of a fire lit by the summer teaching institute experience, how did that manifest in your teaching? Was there a clear trajectory in the way you were approaching your teaching?

MP: Yes, I gave up the idea that I was trying to teach the whole Old Testament or the whole New Testament. So I gave up the idea of coverage and was more interested in helping students become better readers--reading strategies. So that meant spending more time in class and discussion, less time on making sure that we covered everything in the textbook or whatever. So I found that less was more, yeah. And that was pretty liberating. And then from the Summer Teaching Institute, developing in-class exercises that engage the students. So I didn't--the first three years, I really just gave lectures, which is hard to do more than that with a class of 85. But I did find ways of doing things other than just standing and being the sage on the stage as they say.

CR: Did you find any difficulty in the teaching preparation work for that teaching a full 4-4 load.

MP: Well, thankfully, at the end of that third year, I was moved to tenure track and went down to a three-three, only two of which were survey classes. So that made it actually made a big difference. Yeah, even then it is a challenge too. Because once you have your lecture notes then going back and trying to figure out what would you do in the class, right? That would engage the students. It was an entirely different. Exercise altogether.

CR: Yeah.

MP: But there were some others in the department who were interested in that. Bill Bellinger would have been one of them. And we sort of group of us made up a team and tried things out with each other and told each other what worked and what didn't work in the classroom.

CR: So I know that for many years you've been involved in efforts in the religion department here at Baylor to focus at least some of the graduate students experience on teacher training. And I'm actually a beneficiary of that part of that work when I was going through the program. So talk about the early stages of that. How did that become something that you particularly got interested in?

MP: Okay. Well, in 2001, I think it was this was actually student initiated. We had a couple of graduate students come to Dr. Bellinger, who at that time was the Director of Graduate Studies and me. And we recruited Dr. Rosalie Beck. So the three of us, and Galen Johnson was one of the students--We recruited another graduate student. They came saying we're graduate students we're preparing to be teachers and we have no experience teaching, right? So which was true. Up until that point, there had been a political issue that you had to be Baptist to teach in the religion department. And so you had to be Baptist to teach undergraduate students. And I don't know if it was Administration or the upper-level leadership in the department or some combination who thought, well, turning graduate students loose on first-year students in Bible classes is not a really good idea. Turned out it was a really good idea. The four or five of us met together. We discovered that the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, Religion and Theology had grants.

CR: Yeah.

MP: So we applied for a grant and the centerpiece of that grant was to create a class for pedagogy. So for our graduate students would take this class. And we somehow got the administration to agree that students could then teach their own section, which, which they did at the beginning. So Rosalie Beck was the, was the inaugural teacher of this pedagogy class. And they in some ways imitate what had gone on in the summer teaching institute. In the class, she did some other things with higher education, et cetera. So that started, it was really a student initiated. We'd gotten this \$50,000 grant. And we set up this class, and then we got permission for students to teach their own class, being observed. So they created a kind of a cohort and that was very successful. And the graduate students who taught as teachers of record often would have higher student evaluations than full-time faculty. Because they had spent a lot of time thinking about what the class would be like. So that went on for a few more years. And in 2015, we applied for another Wabash grant called Next Steps. And the, the, the purpose of that was to help educate our faculty, to think about mentoring as being more than research mentor, but also to mentor in terms of teaching. So we instigated a program. You may have been part of that

CR: yep.

MP: During that time. In fact, I think you helped us with some of the interviews that we did. So that had several outcomes, one of which was our students, were teaching classes of 65 and when they got jobs that were going out and teaching classes of 20 or 30.

CR: Yeah.

MP: So a lot of the things that we're learning in the pedagogy class if they weren't able to implement fully in the class of 65, so well--

CR: I'll jump in. Just because I know this from personal experience. It was not just the class numbers, but the physical affordances of the classrooms as well because in many of them were bolted down seats.

MP: That's right. Yeah. It was very difficult group to do group work when your seat is bolted to the floor. So we had A consultant come in, Patricia Killen, who gave us lots of different recommendations. One of which was to decrease the size of the student class, graduating class in half, which we did. So that continues now called the students have classes, I think of 29 or 30.

CR: Yeah.

MP: And it's been very successful. So Rosalie Beck, stepped out of the teaching role of the class and I took that over for four or five years. And now Dr. Lisa Edwards is the coordinator of the teaching colloquy. It was very successful. And I think some other departments are on the campus, have instituted with their own class. Similar to what we do.

CR: Yeah. So in those years when you were teaching the graduate colloquy, what did you take from that experience? Did you change the course much in the years that you were teaching it, did you experiment?

MP: Rosalie had spent about a fourth of the class, I think, on issues of higher education and also preparing students to put together dossier for job hunting. Yeah. And we displaced that into some other professional development things and really focused the pedagogy class on preparing to teach these two classes, which is the Introduction to Christian scriptures and Christian heritage. With the goal being at the end of that semester, they would have a syllabus for each of those two classes. So

that was more focused. And the other thing that we did was going back to the Summer Teaching Institute, We did micro teaching where students taught in front of the other students and got immediate feedback on that. And then we also they had been doing video recording of students while they were teaching and then meeting with them and going over it. But the last year or two, because some of the literature I've been reading in the scholarship on teaching, I'd come across this idea of doing rounds like medical school, students where you go around and observe experienced surgeons or whatever. Yeah. So we started doing that. I would arrange with one of our full-time professors for our class of graduate tends to come in and observe them teaching. And so we'd make our rounds two or three different classes. And then the person we observe will come in and talk to us about their strategy, why they did this? Yeah, and do that. That was an added benefit I think, to the class.

CR: Good. I'm sure you carefully selected those instructors whom you visited. But what do you do in that awkward situation when maybe there's something that did not work or that maybe went against what you were trying to teach. The students then saw?

MP: Well, the students, when we have the follow-up conversation would ask, why, why did you do this? And most of the time the professors say, Well, it didn't work that well. Yeah, we learn from our failures as much as we do from our successes.

CR: Right? So yeah, yeah. So you have to have good natured, good-humored people involved in it.

MP: Yeah.

CR: Yeah. You were mentioning with the next steps program that sort of a bedrock of that was the mentor relationship between the faculty and the graduate student focused on teaching. What kind of reactions did you get from faculty? What sort of feedback did you get on that project?

MP: Well, it was mixed, to be honest. Some faculty resisted the notion that being a mentor meant doing more than advising a student on their research and their dissertation. Yeah, but I would say more than not. And what was interesting was, it was some of the older or more experienced faculty who are most open to the idea of expanding. I thought maybe they would be the most resistant, yeah. But it turned out that they were quite open to this idea of expanding their mentoring to the students. One of the things that we tried to do, and I think it's been partially successful, is the idea of co-teaching. Yeah. So we've had it on the books where a student and a faculty member could co-teach a class together. And we, during the next steps phase of the Wabash grant, we actually had that as part of the program. And we had a number of success stories there were student, professor taught together. That's hard to perpetuate because our system isn't built for team teaching very easily, there a lot of obstacles for various reasons. So when you co-teach, the student was really doing that. But not as teacher of record because you can't have two teachers of record. And so we had to finesse our way around. Yeah. How do you get student evaluations for that? But it was still the folks who did that

and I did it myself two or three times. It's a lot of work, because everything is negotiated when you're teaching with someone else. And but it's also very rewarding. So the students in the class get to see two different people interacting with each other, seeing two different styles of teaching. And the graduate student gets to learn from the professor and vice versa, the Professor learns from them. So that was a—I had had experience team teaching because I was in the BEC right back or early 90s where where we had a team of eight professors who were teaching together. Yeah, that was that was a good model for this.

CR: Yeah. Do you have thoughts both being on the end of helping graduate students in their development as teachers and also on the end of like search committees and heighten the hiring processes of what the Academy just in general, needs to do better for helping graduate students for that, you know, not just the job market to sell themselves as teachers, but to be effective teachers when they begin their roles?

MP: Well, the program where we train graduate students as teachers is a huge step forward. As I said, I had nothing like that coming through. So I really feel like our graduate students are better prepared to go into the classroom than certainly I was, and most of the people, most of my cohorts back in the, back in the day. So I think continuing to do that and finding ways to incur as your academy has done. Finding ways to provide opportunities for graduate students to explore the scholarship of teaching, to have more experience cross-disciplinary, it makes a difference. I think our students have done well on the job market. It's tough as it is. And part of that is because they are encouraged not only to be good researchers, but to be good teachers and they have experience with that and they have documentation for what they've done in their right. So it's not just throwing them into the class is doing that and I mentored way. So the other meeting with each other, I'm meeting with professors are talking about what worked, what didn't work, what can be done differently? Yeah. That's sort of thing.

CR: Yeah. Well, I'm really excited to talk to you about the project that you are, I think on the finishing stages on your faith, faith traditions, and pedagogy projects—another Wabash funded work. Just give us the big picture on this. What were you trying to do? What how what, how did you go about this work?

MP: Well, the credit goes to Patricia Killen, who whom I mentioned a moment ago when she was here for the next steps, why bash grant and helping us think about how we can improve what we were doing teaching wise. We were at lunch and as we were leaving, she said to me, really out of the blue, Have you ever thought about whether or not there's a Baptist pedagogy?

CR: Uh-huh.

MP: And I looked at her and thought, No, that's not something that really ever crossed my mind. And she said, Well, I have this working hypothesis that the theological heritage of faith related colleges and universities animates pedagogy in ways that we don't actually recognize. And I thought that's a really interesting question. So we got a little 5,000 dollar Wabash grant and we gathered together. And you were part of that as a non Baptist observer, right?

CR: Yeah.

MP: Yeah. A group of Baptist professors, mostly in the religion department. I think I had someone from true it also. And we engaged and we brought Bill Leonard, eminent professor of baptist history, into to talk to us about what are the Baptist convictions, yeah, distinctives. And we had this discussion, and it turned out that it seemed that there were some commonalities that grew out of our Baptist formation that might, that were not unique to pedagogy at a Baptist school, but what's certainly might qualify as distinctive. So we took that to the National Association of Baptists professors of religion and did the same exercise, which I'll talk about in a moment at other, with other Baptists professors at other schools. And some of the same themes began to emerge, e.g. when you're thinking about teaching at its best, which is the exercise that we engaged in. One of the things that was in common for so many was primacy of the text at hand, whether it's the Bible or some other historic texts. The ideal of sitting around in a circle and a table, engaging in discussion as opposed to lecture. The value placed on descent or the person who made maybe disagreeable to the majority opinion and finding ways to honor that. Well, Patricia is Roman Catholic and her bigger project was thinking about do, do faith traditions, And other traditions have similar effects in terms of shaping or forming.

CR: Yeah.

MP: Our pedagogical practices. So we got another Wabash grant. And this time we invited two professors from four or five different religious traditions. So we had a couple of Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Historically Black Universities and universities in the AME tradition and Church of Christ. And we met together in 2021 in San Antonio and we went through the same sort of exercises. And turns out that there were some commonalities, as you might imagine, between the Church of Christ on the one hand, and Pentecostals on the other. But there are also differences. And the Roman Catholics. When, when the, when the Church of Christ, we're talking about doing something with the Bible and stuff that just didn't register with them. That that would be the place to start with pedagogical practices. So right, things began to emerge both in terms of commonalities and in terms of distinctives. So the last phase is, we've asked these folk, they went back to their home institutions and did something similar. This teaching at its best. When you think about a moment or two when you thought teaching really did become animated and what you would call it at its very best, specific incidents. And from those, we, we listened to them and tried to tease out the values and perhaps even the theological convictions that were underpinning that, identifying those. And so that's the folks are writing those up. We're going to publish those reflection pieces in an issue and perspectives and religious studies.

CR: Yeah.

MP: So the idea is, you know, religious feel it religiously affiliated institutions. Perhaps now more than ever post-COVID or are struggling with how to maintain their identity in a post Christian world, if that's what we're in. The two paths that have traditionally been taken have not proven to be all that successful. So on the one hand, this notion that sometimes called atmospheric, that you just create an environment in which you're Christian. So you're Christian in terms of being hospitable to other people and creating an environment that might sort of fill the places as Christian, which is a good thing to do, but often not sustainable over a long period. There's nothing perhaps, necessarily distinctive about that. Yeah, the other hand, the other path has often been to impose some kind of creedal statement that everybody is synced to lifestyle statement or a statement of faith. And everybody has sense to that. And that's a way to maintain the theological heritage of the institution that may work well for some religiously affiliated institutions that are accustomed to affirming creeds as part of their makeup. But for low church are Radical Reformation or whatever you want to call them, where there's not a common creed that can appear to be pretty heavy handed.

CR: Yeah.

MP: And so that hasn't necessarily worked all that well either this way. You're going through pedagogy and you're trying to say some of the distinctives of our tradition emerge in the ways we teach. And maybe we can lift those up even for those who may not belong to our tradition, but who are here can see that as being a fruitful way forward. Not to dismiss either of the other two necessarily, but a kind of third way that that may prove to be more fruitful, sustainable down the road.

CR: To what degree was this project able to suss out differences between institution and individual convictions? Or was that not really on the radar for this particular project?

MP: Well

CR: thinking about myself as a Lutheran who teaches in a Baptist contexts like what are the, what are the productive and maybe difficult tensions that arise.

MP: So we didn't get, we didn't get to that point. I think that might be a next step beyond. We intentionally chose people who identified with the tradition of the institution where they taught yet. But when those persons went back to their institutions and did similar exercises, they did in some of them engage folks who either didn't identify with that particular division or maybe it was no tradition.



And it still seemed to be productive in the sense that there were shared values. I mean, some of the faculty might not have been comfortable talking about theological commitments or convictions, but shared values in terms of the dignity of the individual, et cetera, were things that people resonated with. Sometimes they got, got down below the values into the underlying and animating theological convictions that they could affirm. Lutherans are a particularly hard nut to crack. As you know, Because the institutions vary so greatly in terms of how they understand their relationship to that tradition.

CR: Yeah, yeah.

MP: So it was that the two Luther institutions that I think recruited people who either weren't part of the Lutheran tradition or our somehow disaffected from it and yet still able to see, sometimes perhaps reluctantly, oh yeah, that is a value that probably comes out of Lutheran theology. So another step would be, how do you with faculty who don't identify with the tradition, that is the sponsoring tradition or community of the university. How do they become engaged in that? I think would be another question to move to, which we haven't done. We, we had kind of a Noah's Ark. We brought two by two by two on. That was partly in an effort to remove part of the individuality. So it's not just one from each tradition, we had two, and what did they see coming in common from institutions that could be church Christ, Pepperdine on the one hand, Abilene Christian, right, on the other, two very different institutions. And yet there were some commonalities that emerged out of that from those traditions.

CR: Yeah. Yeah. One of the ways that the question, I guess maybe in your, in your categories of environmental or atmospheric versus sort of creedal that Lutherans have tried to do this is the vocation aspects to that in a lot of Luther and colleges. And I think it's spread beyond Lutheranism two, because it is a, it's a less overt sort of way of kind of digging at some of the bedrock convictions. Certainly of reformation churches and the Catholic churches. You probably have encountered this. Not all of them of course, but the Catholic schools have at least a possibility of a rich heritage in ignition pedagogy as well. So there were some things that are already baked in. What did you learn about Baptists in particular,

MP: Right. Well, the Catholics are further along in this indebtedness to the Jesuits and the ignition pedagogy, etc. I think with the Baptists, what we learned is what we have always found about baptist. It's pretty messy. So in the classroom, if you're, if you're honoring the dissenting voice and you're centering the text over an individual. I think it actually, I think it goes back to the Summer Teaching Institute with--this is a question I've mentioned to you before that I'd love to see explored in some way--to what degree Bob Baird and Tom Hanks, both Baptist, who presented a particular way of thinking about pedagogy. To what degree were those Baptist ideals embedded even in the what has become the ATL in the Summer Teaching Institute that has been perpetuated for it. So it's making clear what has remained inchoate for so long in terms of what is really shaping us.

CR: Yeah.

MP: So yeah. And then Bill entered was very helpful to us and pointing out, well, these are things that are distinctive about, again, doesn't have to be unique. But the combination of, of convictions does, does result in a distinctive kind of pedagogy that is lifted up as being successful or effective or teaching it as best as it were.

CR: What really excites me about this--A lot of things do, but one of the things that really excites me about this work is that it seems to have a promise for helping instructors construct a more coherent philosophy of teaching. And especially if you're going to teach at a school in your faith tradition or you're applying to school in your faith tradition. You could incorporate that kind of language into your teaching philosophy statement in a way that's, that really sets it apart from all the other ones. They're going to read where everyone wants to do student-centered this and critical thinking that, but to really bring, bring my own history, bringing our tradition into how we teach in an organic way. Yes, I mean, as you know, and you've read a lot of them teaching philosophies, it can be pretty vapid terms of what you say. So one of the other pieces that undergirds what [inaudible] and I've been doing is this notion of a signature pedagogy, which is, you know, Christopher emerged out of professional schools. So you go to a medical school. And there's a particular way medical students For generations have been trying one of which includes the daily rounds in the hospital training. So you're doing your rotations regardless of where you are. So there are law schools, recitation, etc.

CR: Yeah.

MP: So there are signature pedagogies. And so that growing out of professional schools has been explored in the humanities. Is there such a thing as a signature pedagogy for a church related or unrelated institution. Yeah, if you could articulate that in a teaching philosophy, that this is a signature pedagogy that fits within the mission of this particular institution. Then I think you'd really go a long way. Helping an institution or a search committee see your fit to that mission? Yeah, because you're able to speak to that language and it has a lot of benefits. I mean, I think administrators would like to have faculty who can articulate the distinctives of that school's mission in ways that are attractive and compelling in the classroom, as opposed to just a PR campaign, right?

CR: Yeah. How has this work affected your own view of your own teaching or been infused into your own practice?

MP: Well, it has made me more self-reflective about what I do and why I do it. And so I've been teaching 37 years. I've been teaching some form of introductory gen ed class. All those, all those years. I now find out this semester I'm teaching a section. I find myself spending an hour or two going over material that I've taught for a very long time. Thinking about, is there a better way of introducing this, are engaging the students. So I think--and that is one of the things about Patricia that I value so

much as she is very self-reflective in terms of why why are you doing what you're doing? Yeah. And so I think I've become more intentional about that in terms of...so today, e.g. I. Just came from teaching the Psalms. In the past. I've lectured on the Psalms. Today we did a worksheet, spent the entire class going through the worksheet. And then at the end we came back and talked about, what about the Psalms in terms of how they form and setting about the canonical shape. And so that was a very different way. I'd probably, the only thing I lectured about was Bruce Springsteen's "into the fire" and put it in the setting of 9/11.

CR: Okay,

MP: Then we went from there to form inspecting for the different thinking about context and all of that. Yeah.

CR: Yeah. That's fantastic. I mean, that's the only way I think you can really maintain the joy of teaching for that long is to be willing to just always look at it critically and to try something new. And it's not going to always work every class period or every semester. But it keeps the keeps the excitement about it alive.

MP: And we've talked a lot about being a student oriented, student-centered. There comes a point where you know the material well enough, but it does change given the composition of each each semester's class.

CR: Yep.

MP: And being more attentive to those students are I think is a real benefit for the spark and the teaching alive.

CR: yeah. Well, what's on the horizon for you when it comes to teaching and teacher training and that kind of thing?

MP: Well, I'm not teaching the teaching pedagogy class again. We are now working on trying to pull these essays together into the, into the issue. We've done a couple of workshops and some panels on that. I'm looking forward to in the next year, team teaching again, with a grad student with a grad student because COVID threw a wrinkle into everything. Yeah. I did learn how to do things on Canvas.

CR: You're not the only one.

MP: And I now have my course and modules which, which is very neatly packaged, don't remember. But I am looking forward to doing some team teaching with a graduate student and seeing where that goes in the next year or so.

CR: Fantastic. Well, Mike Parsons, Thank you so much for joining the show today. Thank you for having me. It's been a delight.

Our thanks again to Dr. Mikeal Parsons for speaking with us today. In this episode, show notes, you'll find links to the Wabash Center, which has supported much of Dr. Parsons pedagogical work and a piece by Lee Shulman on signature pedagogies. That's our show. Thanks for listening and join us next time for Professors Talk Pedagogy.