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Walking the Land: Teaching the Book of Joshua through Spatial-Kinesthetic Teaching Strategies in the Undergraduate Setting

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ABSTRACT

Outdoor Class Day provides a visual-spatial and bodily-kinesthetic way to introduce students to the land of the Bible as well as the book of Joshua. Students follow their instructor around the campus, visiting locations which are reimagined through role-play and visual association as parts of the biblical land and the story of Joshua 1-8. Research into Howard Gardner's (2011) visual-spatial and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences suggests they are not separable intelligences or styles of learning, but the terms provide helpful descriptors for the dynamics and benefits of active learning out of doors, including decreased abstraction of the biblical text, increased sense of the relevance of academic biblical study, increased memorable integration of the material, and increased religious literacy.

KEYWORDS

multiple intelligences, biblical studies, role-play, Joshua, threshold concepts

Recent research on the social context of learning has made instructors in religion and theology more aware than ever of its effect on student learning outcomes. Instructors often intentionally make room for students to ask questions, invite students to participate in the instruction (through student presentations, for example), encourage student-to-student on-task collaboration, and make informal efforts to know students in personal ways ([Walker and Baepler 2018](#)). What follows is an example of another attempt to modify the social context of learning through changes to student learning space in order to encourage better student learning outcomes. Specifically, this essay enquires about the benefits of outdoor instruction. What happens when students enact a biblical text (from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible) outdoors and receive instruction by observing, hearing, and feeling in the context of nature rather than the classroom? It offers some reflection along the way and brief conclusions at the end. However, due to the new and experimental form of this instruction, appropriate goals and measurements of the learning that occurs in these settings have yet to be determined. As a result, the analysis provided here is more qualitative than quantitative and is presented as an invitation for others to join in this type of teaching and

reflection. More clarity on what is being attempted and what is occurring is a requisite initial stage before quantitative analysis will be possible. But first, before continuing with further goals and analysis, an introduction to this method and its inherent risks.

The Goals and Risks of “Outdoor Class Day”: A Teacher’s Story

Unbeknownst to my students ahead of time, I choose a different wardrobe for “Outdoor Class Day.” I wear my favorite broad-brimmed hat as a social signal of my intentional change to our usual classroom culture. Outdoor Class Day is also known to my students as “Joshua Day” because the course in which the method is employed is an introductory, Interpreting the Old Testament, and the content for the day is the plot, themes, and issues of the book of Joshua. The room as I enter is filled with twenty-five to thirty undergraduates of our four-year residential college who are abuzz with anticipation, but I purposely choose not to reciprocate. As with the hat, I want to send a social signal. I remain cordial, but I want students to recognize by my demeanor that our fifty-minute session is still learning time, not just play time. Because this is my sixth year at this institution, word has spread from previous participants to almost all of the current students: “Outdoor/Joshua Day is awesome. You’ll love it,” but it is up to me to keep the focus on the biblical content.

Yes, I take students out of the classroom and onto the grounds of our campus, but I will read to them from the Bible, point to various aspects of its geography, flora, and fauna, and ask students to reimagine them as part of the land of Israel or particular items in the text of Joshua 1–8 and 24. The focus remains on the biblical text, but in a way that involves them more in its world. This is not a field day; it is an attempt to use the outdoors as a new kind of classroom. Unlike “outdoor education/learning” (for example, Hill and Brown 2014) or “place-based education” (for example, Dolan 2015) programs, our use of the outdoor world will not seek to learn *from* the outdoors so much as to learn *within* it.

As an instructor, this energy, excitement, and change to the learning space is both a promise and peril. Like other experiments in teaching, colleagues might see my parading students out of doors as catering to baser student desires for fun rather than helping them truly to learn. Few, if any, other instructors at my institution do this kind of teaching. Some may hold class on the steps of a building, under a tree, or in an outdoor amphitheater; no others that I know of, however, dress up or march around. It is not what professors do here—at least not yet.

There is peril, too, not just in what fellow faculty may perceive but in what students may misunderstand. Our college is based on Christian values but not all students are Christians. Some from church backgrounds, however, may misread my efforts to be more like Sunday school than creative academic engagement. Therefore, my vocabulary and conceptual framing must remain academic, even while I seek to engage their imaginations. Additionally, students must be carefully prepared. They have been notified to “Be ready to be outside for the whole class period and to walk from building to building around campus, stopping and talking for extended periods sometimes.” Students with mobility issues, or in need of any kind of special assistance, must be (and have been) consulted personally and plans made for their accommodation. While these students have been my biggest concern in attempting this kind of teaching, so far students with special needs have, in fact, been enthusiastic participants. The change in learning space has often provided an opportunity for me to demonstrate informal care and support to students at whatever level they desire (for example, a student with leg braces requested no special notice of them because they wanted to show other students their relative ability while, in a different case, a student who is legally blind chose, for themselves, a student classmate to assist them during the session should they need it). Weather is always a concern. I have only once been nearly rained out, but we managed to move during moments of lighter showers and cover enough to still get the full experience. All in all, there are certainly risks to this new attempt at teaching, but in my context the appropriate counter-measures I deploy appear to be working sufficiently. Further questions about whether the efforts are worth these inherent risks are, however, appropriate and part of the purpose of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Parameters of Research

In a tradition of pedagogical reflection already established in the SoTL in theology and religion, this essay most closely follows the model of what has been termed “Show and Tell” (an essay demonstrating that “*insight about teaching proceeds directly from practice*”); however, it draws on other SoTL models as well, including ones that accent the person of the instructor and questions how instruction is generally done, especially in biblical studies (Killen and Gallagher 2013, 115, 119, italics original). Far from mere story, essays of this sort represent “systematic and sustained” reflection and are often helpful to undergraduate teachers outside the field of theology and religion (Killen and Gallagher 2013, 109). In the present case in particular, those in literature or history may particularly benefit from the principles of symbolic re-presentation of narratives since they share the common goal of the interpretation of event and/or text.

The specific type of teaching and learning experience I have practiced and survey here, not unlike other similar efforts before me (Wolfe 2009), is one which highlights what Howard Gardner has termed “visual-spatial” and “bodily-kinesthetic” “intelligences” (2011). We ought to note from the start that Gardner has claimed too much for his theory of “multiple intelligences.” Waterhouse argues in her review of his work that Gardner himself “has not proposed testable components for the intelligences” nor has empirical testing found that separate parts of the brain contain completely separate neural pathways corresponding to his identified “multiple intelligences” as he suggests should be the case (Waterhouse 2006, 208–9; cf. Garner and Moran 2006).

Instead, Waterhouse suggests, what research has confirmed is “large-scale information processing pathways or processing streams in the brain,” including (a) “*what is it?*” and “*where is it?*” pathways that appear to synthesize our various “perceptual analyses” but with overlapping triggers (such as touch) and (b) two distinct decision-making processes (a “fast, intuitive” process and a “slow, effortful” one, respectively named “System 1” and “System 2” by Kahneman [2003]) (Waterhouse 2006, 211). Together with other observations from evolutionary psychologists about adapted cognition modules, these empirically-based studies suggest that humans use many different things (that is to say with disparate brain activities) in the process of accumulating and acting upon knowledge. Different modes of presentation and expression beyond the verbal and analytical are inherent. In the end, we are mistaken to call these multiple complex brain processes across a range of perceptual input systems “intelligences,” or to join Gardner (2011) in arguing for their separate evolutionary development or exclusive operation. Whatever changes in student learning take place as a result of moving a class session outside, it seems unlikely to me that they are engaging in a different “intelligence.”

However, even if the findings above counter Gardner’s (2011) claims, they still emerge from an examination into Gardner’s theories and dialogue with them. His provocation to research ways we learn (especially among educators) should be duly credited. The end results of wrestling with Gardner are themselves suggestive. With regard to tactile, spatial, and kinesthetic approaches to learning, for example—and outdoors especially—one can well imagine utilizing both “*what is it?*” (“*what are we doing?*”) and “*where is it?*” (“*where are we going?*”) pathways, each shifting their decision-making process about the importance of the material presented to them from passive System 1 thinking to more active System 2 thinking (Kahneman 2003), potentially enabling better retention or modification of information (in other words, better learning).

That being said, my goal here is not to argue for such a synthesis of empirically verifiable learning outcomes for out of doors teaching and learning (if indeed such results could even be verified). Instead, the goal here is more modest: It argues that when my students express appreciation and delight in learning outside, they are not just being especially entertained in this particular class period but are (as self-reported in evaluations) actually learning better. The ways they are learning better are varied, including not just understanding concepts and retaining information, but synthesizing the information, values, and arguments presented with their own religious presuppositions and expectations. For now, we may speak of these advances as related to Gardner’s concept of spatial and kinesthetic learning (2011), as a meaningful grammar for what we do as teachers and the kind of active learning students do (Joyner and Young 2006), even if we remain circumspect about the cognitive pathways and processes entailed.

One final point of clarification: This essay is decidedly not arguing for the use of teaching outdoors as a way to accommodate certain students’ kinesthetic learning style. The notion of learning styles is still pervasive (perhaps especially among

those of us who teach but are not directly engaged in the fields of psychology or education). The notion that some forms of teaching help kinesthetic learners who have a particular learning style, meaning a “consistent way of responding and using stimuli in the context of learning,” has been defined and debated since the 1970s and has yet to find any empirical support (Claxton and Ralston 1978; Husmann and O’Loughlin 2019, 6). Similarly, in the 1990s, the VARK model—standing for Visual, Auditory, Reading/writing, and Kinesthetic—was developed chiefly by Neil Fleming with a corresponding questionnaire, now available online (Husmann and O’Loughlin 2019, 6–7; [VARK 2019](#)). The VARK model proposed that students not only have preferred learning styles but that these styles (a) are the ways that those students learn best and that (b) teachers ought to teach with a variety of methods corresponding to these styles so that each student has an equivalent chance of success in learning. Husmann and O’Loughlin’s review is only one recent example in a line of studies and meta-analyses demonstrating that the idea of “learning styles” is essentially a myth ([Nancekivell, Shah, and Gelman 2019](#); Willingham, Hughes, and Dobolyi 2015; Rogowsky, Calhoun, and Tallal 2014). These reports suggest that changing teaching styles to match student learning styles does not significantly improve learning outcomes and that while students may have preferences for how material is presented to them, their actual performance is not impaired by receiving material outside that preferred manner of presentation (Husmann and O’Loughlin 2019, 7).

What I Do

Outdoor Class Day is dedicated to teaching students about the book of Joshua. Prior to class, students read Joshua 1-8 and 24 and take an online, timed, open-book, five-question quiz on the biblical text. Once gathered for our usual class period, students are reminded of the plan, and we head out. Some carry their Bibles, but as long as the key biblical texts (and handouts for later, more precise academic analysis) are on hand, they do not need a copy.

The Death of Moses and the Impact of Geography

Once outside the building, students stand in a semicircle, and I “introduce” myself as their tour guide for the day. We read Deuteronomy 34 aloud, describing the death of Moses and the introduction of Joshua as his successor and Israel’s new leader. We take time to discuss both Moses and Joshua in a back and forth, question-and-answer style. We also intentionally discuss some of the geographic details: “Why does the text say he saw so far? Israel is only seventy miles wide at its widest point, but from Mount Nebo to Tel Dan is roughly 130 miles. It’s a good view from Nebo at 2300 feet. A normal person would see about eighteen miles. But could he really see that far? What’s going on?”

“Nettlesome questions.” While students think about what is “going on” with Moses, something more important is “going on” in their learning. By posing a question they have not likely considered, they are pressed to think, in this case about prophets, promises, and covenants. I agree with Carol Bechtel that the goal of teaching is not just information retention, but formation and integration of the material, and that one the most effective ways to do this is to ask a “nettlesome question” (2002, 375). At this undergraduate institution we aim to encourage in students a sense of wonder at—or, at least, respect for—the Bible’s depth and complexity, even if they do not view it as religiously authoritative. Awkward silence among students in response to a good question is, therefore, a good thing; a sign of real, System 2 thinking.

Introducing the land. Whether students realize it or not, they are receiving an introduction to the land of Israel/Palestine. Since the first day of the course, student have understood that the Hebrew Bible was written by the people of this particular land over a long period of time. We have discussed the concept of the “implied reader” in Genesis-Deuteronomy—that the text assumes its reader is a Hebrew speaker from the land. (For more an accessible introduction to this concept and uses of it in biblical studies, see Bockmuehl [2006].) However, since we have been following the canonical order of the books, this is the first time, apart from brief mentions in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that we begin to consider the nature of the land itself. In many ways, it is the land, more than any one person, which is most consistently responsible for the way the biblical text is authored (setting aside divine authorship). Like having English students read a few Shakespearean plays to become familiar with his language, cadence, and culture before taking time to introduce the person of Shakespeare, this day in my course deepens the students’ relationship with a land and people they already thought they knew. One projected learning outcome of this method, then, is to communicate indirectly how much more there is for students to learn, even

in order to understand a small, fairly straightforward passage like Deuteronomy 34. Although giving geographic facts in a classroom may explain the ostensive meaning of such a passage, walking outside to make this introduction makes the Bible's origins more geographically bounded and less theoretical. For a moment, land is a thing we literally stand on and live with, not just a concept we discuss.

Symbolic learning. Throughout the rest of the class period as we walk around the campus (see below), this introduction to the land continues. Especially important are references to Palestine/Israel's specific topography and comparisons between the climate of Israel/Palestine and the climate of our area. In our case, there are a number of similarities, including temperature, agriculture, coastland, plains, hills, and mountains. Of the land's major features, only its desert (Negev) and perpetually snowcapped peak (Mt. Hermon) have no clear parallel near where I teach. I can describe the size of the Jordan river, for example, by comparing its flow and breadth to one nearby. Although this could be done in a classroom, saying it outdoors has a different effect. Even though we are not standing near the river while on campus, we are closer to geographic features in general, and remapping our view of the landscape with comparative land features in the Bible means our own environment becomes a *symbol* of the biblical one. Even if one teaches in a less topographically similar location, the diversity of Israel's landscape means Hebrew has names for a wide variety of topographical features and climatic experiences. Fortunately, this diverse topography also means professors who want to venture outdoors should be well-able to find their own points of symbolic contact with the topography of Palestine/Israel.

This symbolic approach is enacted in less topographical ways as well. As we continue our journey across campus, Outdoor Class Day allows the instructor to rename campus roads, walkways, and buildings as representations of biblical rivers, boundaries, or cities. Gardner describes this kind of symbolic learning as an important aspect of teaching navigation in some locations. Not unlike the "pebbles on the floor" of a Puluwat canoe house which are used as symbols to teach young sailors the configurations of the stars they will need to know for later voyages, students who encounter campus features during Outdoor Class Day have the opportunity to mentally join biblical landscapes and stories within them (Gardner 2011, 351). Students from my course even report that sometimes when they come across these campus features again later in their college careers, they are suddenly reminded of the biblical configuration imaginatively encountered during our class. Using the physical environment, the campus becomes layered with symbolic meaning and a means to continued reflection on the biblical text and world.

The "foreign" nature of the Bible. However, it is not only similarities in contexts (i.e., the land or climate) which might assist instruction in the outdoor setting, the differences can also be helpful. At opportune moments in an overall "tour of the land," instructors can point out features of the landscape that students assume are part of the Bible but, in point of fact, are not. For example, in my course, I point to the sky and ask students to look for vultures. At this, I mention how some American Christians like to quote Isaiah 40:31 ("they shall mount up with wings like eagles"), sometimes even depicting the verse in photographs and drawings with a bald eagle, sometimes alongside an American flag. The Hebrew in this verse, however, is perhaps better translated as "vulture" (cf. Hosea 8:1)! I suggest that the next time they look up at the sky they will give the vultures a little more respect, and when they look at their Bibles, they will remember that it was not actually written to Americans.

The Bible is a "strange" place (Barth 1978), not just in its literary and theological structures but in its setting. Viewing "the biblical world as a foreign country" is a central task of formational (or "transformative") biblical instruction and an emerging "threshold concept" in our field (Bechtel 2002, 370–1, 375; [Van Maaren 2020](#), 67). By physically pointing out the similarities *and differences* between our land and the land of the Bible, students have a unique way to learn not just about the land of the Bible but about the foreignness of the Bible itself and the capacity for its otherness to point back at themselves. While it remains possible that students are "mapping the world onto the Bible" (less desirable) rather than "mapping the Bible onto their world," there is no clear way to measure the difference and anecdotal evidence suggests the latter. That probability increases, I would argue, when the layered landscape is infused with biblical narrative (see Conclusion).

Visual-spatial engagement and personal meaning in academic biblical study. Finally, in reflection on this first section, although the entire class session requires students to use their bodies and movement, there is a particularly visual-spatial quality to this way of introducing the biblical world. Ancient biblical authors looked at the world and saw and named its

creatures and conditions according to their language system. They then used these words to order and describe ancient Judean/Israelite life. The copyists and authors who followed them did the same. This process of seeing, identifying, and utilizing physical experience of place to perform a task is not dissimilar to some of the skills of hunter-gatherer cultures described by Gardner as “spatial” (2011, 211–14). Although this model does not reenact visual cues in order to train students to speak Hebrew or become scribes, it does remove barriers between students’ own contemporary experience and those of the words of the ancient scribes they are reading (in translation). Unlike what happens in a classroom, where students have to imagine a vulture or temperature or trees or elevation in their mind’s eye and then consider this abstraction as the same as yet another abstraction (the way someone in Israel sees and feels in that land), this form of teaching does something with the senses of vision and touch that equates that embodied experience with something in the land and its text. There is a direct visual-spatial epistemic parallel to the ancient writers of the biblical text. It thus effectively eliminates one layer of abstraction from the learning process. Some instructors may be able to invite students, as I do, to: “Feel the air. That’s not unlike the temperature in Israel now.” Or, “Look up. That’s not unlike the animal the author is describing.” Coming back to our initial biblical content, no matter the climate or fauna in their particular area, any teacher could invite their students outside to “look at the horizon” and consider how far they can see versus how far the Bible says Moses could. I am not convinced this kind of experience leads to, or benefits from, any special “*sensitivity to composition*,” as Gardner claims (2011, 208, italics original), but it does take advantage of students’ *experience* with “composition” and reminds them that the biblical text is rife with texture.

I finish my discussion of Moses with some selected quotes from Joshua 1, and we talk about the passing of leadership from one generation to another, then and now. “Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:6, 9) is a dictum many undergraduate students appreciate. Pointing out these kinds of correspondences helps students experience the Bible “as an asset for personal meaning-making” (Van Maaren 2020, 69). I am able to speak as “the Lord” to them as “Joshua” in a way that especially draws out correspondences between the text and students’ experiences of and reflections on the transition from generation to generation.

Following the Ark by Tribes and the Power of Role-Play

No matter the particular biblical narrative, instructors who use outdoor instruction in the form of an Outdoor Class Day have the opportunity to enact stories in a way that is unrepeatable in the classroom setting. In my Joshua example, having firmly taken our place in the story with the character of Joshua, students gather in self-selected groups of three or four to create “tribes.” I call out the names of the tribes, and within seconds, they are choosing which name sounds good to them. They do not realize it, but they are picking roles. Being well-known, one group always picks Levi, which is helpful for our continued reenactment. (Note: I continue this role-play in the classroom later in the course by having students recite their part in the blessings and curses of our reenactment of the Covenant Renewal Ceremony from Deuteronomy 27–28 in the role of the tribes they were part of on Outdoor Class Day.) They continue in these roles when the students playing Levi “take the ark of the covenant” out ahead of the rest of us “one thousand yards” (i.e., 2000 cubits, Joshua 3:4) and stop at the “banks of the Jordan,” which is symbolically represented by an inner-campus road nearby. Invariably students think about how they want to transport their imaginary ark. Without prompting, they almost always recall and integrate information from previous lectures on the tabernacle—the Levites carried the ark (Numbers 4:15; Deuteronomy 31:9; 1 Chronicles 15:14–15)—and act that out, sometimes acting like they are carrying poles with the ark on it; sometimes just walking together in a formation. The “Levites” are instructed to count their steps out loud as they go. As the rest of us watch them go, I ask another “nettlesome question”: “Why would the God of the Bible would instruct Joshua to have the ark so far ahead of them?” While they think, I ask the Levites how far they have gone (usually about one hundred yards). The other students as “tribes” continue our discussion, but now the actual distance of one thousand yards is more spatially and kinesthetically perceptible. Our conversation can continue with greater imaginative realism.

Narrative imagination. This role-playing is deepened as we catch up to the “Levites” standing at the “banks” (curb) of the “river” (road). It is my turn to be the actor. Shifting into a more explicit narrator mode, I recite selections of the book of Joshua’s depiction of the tribes crossing the Jordan river: (a) the water standing “in a heap” “very far away” (3:16), drying up when Levites feet touch the edge of the water, (b) the entrance of the ark into the middle of the river, and (c) their crossing the river tribe by tribe, past the ark, on “dry land” (3:17). Switching back to (excited) commentator, I literally jump up and

down, shouting that this is an intentional parallel with Moses and the Exodus (Joshua 3:17//Exodus 14:21); it is central for seeing Joshua as the “new Moses” (cf. Joshua 1:16-18) and the people as the true inheritors of the Exodus generation (cf. Deuteronomy 5:3; 11:31). Whether or not the story in the text was a historical event (or whether other instructors are as animated as I am), its realistic narrative illocution dramatically connects readers with the events presented, and instructors can use the moment to communicate the intention of the text’s presentation. Here again, students can be encouraged to make a second-person connection and weigh the personal relevance of the academic study of the Bible. I ask, “Standing here watching this miracle happen, imagining you are the Israelites, do you *feel* more encouraged?” Students connect to the emphases of the text, not just with their imagination, but also with their bodies. Whether they believe in God or the Bible as holy scripture, they have a better sense of the goals of the text and its effectiveness.

Multi-sensory learning and religious literacy. This sense of the goals of the biblical text is especially true when students walk past the “Levites” with the “ark.” Much of the biblical (especially Priestly) literature is concerned with proximity to the holy. In the classroom, there is usually no way of connecting that repeated theme to students’ own physical sense of proximity. Here, students are able to do that, even if it is only proximity to an imaginary version of something holy. This may be a place for further research. Given the positive results of others doing similar instruction (e.g. Shoval and Shulruf 2011), it is likely that this kind of multi-sensory experience of the text impacts students’ retention of the information presented. Role-playing is an increasingly common form of instruction across a wide range of disciplines, and even though its impact is difficult to measure (Brummel et al. 2010; Culley and Polyakova-Norwood 2012; Jackson and Back 2011), biblical instructors who use such methods join a growing sustained reflection on this teaching method. Continued SoTL research should enable us to improve our methods (van Ments 1999).

Beyond these insights, note that an embodied (albeit pretended) respect for sacred space and sacred objects is an experience that not only benefits students’ perception of and appreciation for the Bible, but for other religious traditions as well. A student who has read and enacted a specific way of being reverent toward something holy is arguably more capable of acting with similar deference and respect to the cultural and religious treasures of other nations and religions, and this kind of “religious literacy” is an increasingly important outcome for students in undergraduate general education courses (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 13–14). Perhaps someone who has been required to walk from a distance and then respectfully pass by a pretend “holy object” in role-play will be more likely to respect those who take off their shoes in a mosque or denounce the bombing of a temple in warfare. Outdoor education in biblical studies can arguably thus enhance students’ sense of the relevance of academic study; convey concepts of proximity, the sacred, and the retention of those concepts; and grow religious literacy. All of these may be worth future qualitative study.

Performative teaching. Role-playing draws out not only the experience of the students but the professor as well. Although I may be more theatrical in my approach than other professors, all teaching is arguably the performance of a “teaching persona” (Parini 2005, 58; Killen and Gallagher 2013, 116). Others who want to try this technique will no doubt need to find their own way to perform texts in their own outdoor setting and with their own students, considering both the background, place, and expectations of the learners involved as well as the teacher’s own approach to the text and comfort with the teaching style (Gallagher and Maguire 2020, 10, 13, 15; Parini 2005, 58). My own sense is that outdoor education provides yet another venue for this persona to be played out, one that has range inaccessible to the indoor classroom setting.

Bodily-kinesthetic learning. In my Joshua example, our role-playing ends with one more reenactment. This time our focus is on the retrieval (by one person per “tribe”) of memorial “stones” from the river (Joshua 4) and a discussion of how memory functions in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and our own lives. Acting out the activity of the characters of the Bible (here and above) is probably the most bodily-kinesthetic of all the teaching and learning that happens in this outdoor class period; Gardner explicitly cites “The Actor” as one of the “Performing Roles” that demonstrate proficiency in his “bodily-kinesthetic intelligence” (Garner 2011, 239–243). Although I am not training my students or myself to be actors, the “close link between the use of the body and the deployment of other cognitive powers” means that these reenacted moments carry the information and/or values of biblical stories deeper into the lives of my students (Gardner 2011, 220). Timing, sequence, position, and memory are critical to the theatrical performance, and all of them feature in biblical stories (Gardner 2001, 220–221). The parallels are striking and worth noting: biblical texts themselves were developed in an educational environment less static than our own with more emphasis on memory and the performance of tradition

(Niditch 1996; Carr 2005; van der Toorn 2007). Even if the Bible’s scribal cultures never conducted role-play (except at Purim), teaching texts forged in performance may require more bodily engagement from our pedagogy than we currently give it.

Jericho and Balancing the Weight of *Herem*

The final part in my example of Outdoor Class Day begins by leading students to a set of wide steps (ours are in front of our columned, multistory athletic center). For the purposes of our reenactment, it has been pronounced a symbolic version of Jericho. Students seat themselves on the steps in the style of an outdoor amphitheater. In some ways, an amphitheater might suffice given the activity students will engage in; it is mostly sitting. Imagining being near the famous walls of Jericho continues the drama of our day. We review and discuss Joshua 5 and the preparation before the conquest of “Jericho” (i.e. Gibeath-haaraloth/“hill of the foreskins” and the first Passover in the land, including the ceasing of the manna). This section includes some intentional frivolity, inviting the men of the class to come up and huddle in a circle for a moment, pretend to groan in the agony of circumcision, and then limp back to their seats. The admitted silliness is still focused on the biblical story; it helps reinforce the ridiculousness of circumcision as preparation for battle and, similarly, the marching and trumpet playing in Joshua 6 as military strategy. “Everything in the story is done to undermine dependence on human power and instead to make the conquest a highly spiritualized and worship-oriented—not battle- or strength-oriented—event,” I summarize. This alternation from playful reenactment to theological assessment of the text is, in effect, a miniature representation of the tenor of the whole day because what has preceded has been mostly light-hearted and encouraging, but what comes next is some of the heaviest material of the whole course. More by instinct than by planning, this later intensity is offset by the playfulness of the earlier part of the day. As Carol Bechtel argues, “If it helps people learn, it’s worth it!” (2002, 374).

Teaching narratives eclectically. Most biblical narratives have comedic or fantastical elements alongside theologically rigorous ones, and here, the transition from walking a distance to stopping and sitting would not be possible indoors. The transition heightens the intentionality of the moment. For Joshua, the most intense theological challenge is our discussion of *herem*, and I use a handout prepared in advance. It lays out a discussion of the ethical problems of the so-called “conquest.” It places special emphasis on Deuteronomy 7:1–5 and various translations of the imperative verb form of the word, *herem* (i.e., “destroy” or “ban”; cf. Moberly 2013, 60). It is complete with footnotes to competing scholarly perspectives. For my students, this is an important experience both in the “constructed nature of biblical understanding” (i.e., it requires close attention to the exact original term being used) and in the fact that, in biblical studies, like much of the humanities, “everything is an argument.” Both are emerging threshold concepts in biblical studies (Van Maaren 2020, 67–8). Unlike the earlier task of retelling plot lines, in this moment students need to think hard and reason ethically. The change in mode of instruction is intentional and based on the content. Often, “teaching the Bible . . . [requires being] both methodologically aware and, to some extent, eclectic” (Bechtel 2002, 370). In particular, students often need to be led into a slower consideration of the difficult moral decisions involved (e.g., not letting the Bible “off the hook” too quickly). Outdoor Class Day allows for a transition from students’ blood literally pumping from the exercise of walking and reenacting only to have them stop and look the instructor in the eye, and together work through the arguments surrounding an intense subject. The class is able to pay attention to the discussion at hand because of the shift in tone and the balance of “fun and serious at the same time” (Bechtel 2002, 369). This balance extends to the final two bodily-kinesthetic reenactments: the “sin of Achan” in Joshua 6 and an exploration of biblical language about the Canaanite fertility cult. How we might assess the relative effectiveness of this outdoor-based balance in presenting biblical narrative vis-à-vis an indoor presentation is not yet clear to me, but teaching outdoors has made me more aware of this dynamic because of the way I have had to choreograph student movement during this session.

Place-based “storied” interpretation of biblical narrative. Before concluding, it is worth asking: What does Outdoor Class Day bring specifically to the discipline of biblical studies? Does it result in better interpretation of biblical narratives than interpretation in the classroom? I would argue that it does, but the level of perceived effectiveness might also depend on the instructor’s epistemic goals. Recent research on outdoor “experiential learning” has led to sustained reflection on which of a discipline’s epistemic goals are achieved through it, especially ontologically; how do they want students to see themselves and their reality differently after their outdoor education experience relative to their view before (see esp.

Allison and Pomeroy 2000; e.g., with increased “self-confidence” or “self-esteem,” cf. Martin and Leberman 2005; D’Amato and Krasny 2011). This concern for self-growth is not an epistemic focus in biblical studies, but the relationship between a student’s sense of reality and the Bible is central to what kind of interpretation is appropriate to biblical narrative, whether “historic” or “storied.” Is biblical narrative properly interpreted when it is evaluated as historical evidence of past events and ideologies or when the reader joins into the biblical events and view of the world and allows them to “absorb” the reader’s world? (For this distinction, see Frei 1974; see esp. Frei 1986.) Putting the question this way probably bifurcates the discussion too far into the recognizable camps of historical-critical versus theological and does not allow enough for the dynamic (even coercive) relationship *between* reader and text, but it helpfully focuses our attention on students in the learning environment. It is still worth asking: Does an *enacted* instruction of the biblical text cause an epistemic shift in students toward the historical or the storied? Indeed, there is likely a level of epistemic incongruity occurring when I have my class enact Joshua (perhaps more storied), but then sit and reconsider the multiple possible meanings of *herem* (perhaps more historical). Overall, students seem to have a greater chance of being absorbed by text rather than just appraising it, but again, further research and discussion is warranted. Whatever is happening, highlighting the classic question of critical versus empathetic engagement with the biblical text is a profitable lens for reconsidering the specific task of teaching biblical narratives and the possible advantages of doing so in an outdoor instructional environment.

Conclusion

This reflection on my teaching experience with Outdoor Class Day presents not only what I do (i.e., a teaching tip) but also looks at the pedagogical practice of outdoor instruction of the Hebrew Bible. We can summarize the above into four key aspects of this kind of instruction and a fifth that is less dependent on teaching outdoors but is arguably easier to do in that location.

1. *Kinesthetic Teaching for Kinesthetic Learning, Not for Kinesthetic “Learners” or “Intelligence”*

Despite what I may have thought I was doing when I started teaching this way (or what others think they are doing when they teach this way, contra Wolfe [2009]), the preponderance of research suggests that when we teach using outdoor activities, we are not actually helping visual-spatial or bodily-kinesthetic learners, about whom we should otherwise feel apologetic for leaving them stuck in their seats so many days of the semester. No research supports the idea that students actually learn better as result of being taught according to their preferred styles. They may like to be taught in certain ways—and maybe the comments we get are from especially grateful students who particularly like using their bodies to learn—but they do not need to be taught in this way (or even in a multiplicity of ways) in order for them to learn best (Nancekivell, Shah, and Gelman 2019; Willingham, Hughes, and Dobolyi 2015; Rogowsky, Calhoun, and Tallal 2014). Instead, their likely benefit is in receiving a diverse teaching approach which makes presentation of the content more engaging. Additionally, as we have seen (i.e., with role-playing proximity to holiness and the role of memory), particular styles of teaching may pair well with particular texts or concepts.

2. *Outdoor Environment as Introduction to Geography’s Impact on the Text of the Bible*

To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, biography is a good introduction into any subject (1933, xi); the story of a scholar and their situation often draws us further into the subject that scholar studies. With the Bible we have no single human author, and, as readers in the midst of the story, we are still getting to know the (arguably) divine one. Intuitively, I think, students are trying to get to know the Israelites. They have some sense of their values and concerns, but so much of the vocabulary and concepts of the text are based on the land. Through specific introduction to the geography, topography, flora, and fauna of the biblical world, students can meet this land in a more personal way, thus correlating their physical experiences with those which the biblical text assumes. This is not fully possible, of course, not being in the land itself, but this kind of outdoor teaching reduces the number of layers of abstraction normally present in classroom lectures. Whether

one performs this kind of outdoor teaching with Joshua or not, professors of the Bible will benefit from taking students outdoors as a way of associating their visual-spatial senses with the land of the Bible, a foreign country that they need to see for what it is in order to learn from it.

3. Using Space Outside the Classroom for Imaginative Reenactment

Given that research on how brain patterns and processes correspond with place and body movements (Waterhouse 2006, 211), it is no wonder that students respond strongly to connecting the movement of their bodies within the context of a course of instruction. For biblical teachers, this movement is perhaps best utilized when students connect their own movements in biblical role-play outdoors. Not only do they have more physical room to move and engage dynamics of space (especially with ideas of holiness, as shown), but they have conceptual room to imagine themselves as a member of a specific ancient Israelite tribe. Because of that role, students have an assigned perspective on the events taking place within the story and not just the perspective of their twenty-first century selves. Indeed, it is possible that movement and not just the static memorization of information was inherent in the way biblical texts were formed and transmitted. Given this, the experiment in outdoor instruction presented here suggests that, at minimum, movement ought to be a more significant concern in our instructional methods, especially for those in undergraduate contexts who are not only preparing scholars but also citizens (who could benefit from a sense of the relevance of biblical and religious texts).

4. Balancing the Impact of Content by Shifting Places and Modes of Instruction

Part of the benefit of instructing outside with alternating patterns of movement and seated listening is that students' attention can be refocused from place to place. Students respond to the variety of lighthearted and critical thinking tasks, not just for variety's sake, but because both teacher and students are clearly involved in the spaces, in the same tasks. We are in the same place in a significantly different way than we are when in the traditional classroom ([Druffel and Lerash 2017](#)). Physical changes in location make what instructors are doing clearer. As lecturers, we often make these transitions in the classroom, and we know when some (or sometimes most) of the class are not following the shift in train of thought; they are not intellectually "shifting gears" with us. Being outside provides help with this, especially with difficult or complicated arguments (like *herem*). On this last point, by alternating fun and seriousness, students digest the material in a way that helps them later reflect on the key points, rather than overwhelming them with complexity, possibility, and challenge to their religious commitments (with the potential for them to be "shut down" rather than formed by the material).

5. Shifting Power: Foolishness and Trust in the Instructor-Student Relationship

As a final note, Parker Palmer discussed the dangers of vulnerability that teachers undertake by exposing themselves to students' critique (1998, 17). Leaving aside whether he is right that one should avoid using a persona with students to protect ourselves (contra Parini 2005), Palmer is correct that the academic community is based on critique. Students of our current digital and consumer age arguably feel they have more right than ever to critique their professors and have more ability to "troll" them in course evaluations. Each professor will have their own way of doing this, but one of the subtler benefits of teaching outdoors is that my willingness to make a fool of myself seems to build trust with my students. In fact, in the classroom, students are as vulnerable (or more so) as teachers; teachers probably have greater power over students' futures than vice versa. By willingly making a fool of myself and being appropriately silly (within reason), students can tell that I am doing so because I care. I make myself vulnerable, not for the mere sake of their affirmation (as in a theatrical performance), but for the sake of their learning the content. I think students can tell, by the risks I am taking in teaching them in a different way, that I am willing to do almost anything to help them learn. Other professors will have different ways of being willing to "make a fool" of themselves, but being outdoors may create physical opportunities to do this in ways which might look contrived in the classroom. When we take risks in teaching in general, we are, I think, submitting ourselves in service to students—not wielding grades over them—and they can tell. They absolutely sense the "foolishness" of the thing we are doing, but they know that it is for their sake. I think they appreciate that, and it further

connects us to our students, not only for that class period but for the rest of the course; a benefit to the whole of the semester is granted by the risks undertaken in just one day. These risks are worth it in multiple ways, and we would do well to try them and consider if and how they work.

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