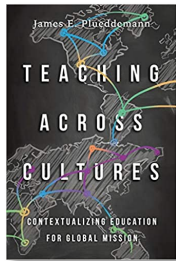


## [Review] *Teaching across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission*, by James E. Plueddemann



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Plueddemann, James E. 2018. *Teaching across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic. 168 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-5221-5.

In his book *Teaching across Cultures: Contextualizing Education for Global Mission*, James E. Plueddemann applies a teaching model that weaves practical advice about teaching with abstract knowledge, personal stories, and theoretical premises. It is not only cerebral but also spiritual, at times even playful. When I stopped reading, I felt refreshed, engaged, and enlightened.

Plueddemann begins his exploration of teaching across cultures by listing three metaphors: teacher as technician, whose goal is to pour data into the empty vessel of the student; teacher as gardener, whose goal is to nurture the students so that they “blossom in whatever way their nature inclines them to grow” (13); and teacher as tour guide, leading the student on a journey. Although all three have merits and drawbacks, Plueddemann prefers a fourth metaphor—that of pilgrimage, where teachers and students explore together with a set destination in mind. In his writing, Plueddemann follows this pilgrimage model and invites the readers along.

As we travel with the author deeper into the heart of the book, we encounter his central model for teaching cross-culturally: a humble rail fence. This rail fence can be seen as a key discovery in the pilgrim journey. Its bottom rung symbolizes a learner's reality—life, experiences, concerns, and environment. The top rung symbolizes the subject matter that the teacher can impart. The real learning happens in the vertical fence posts, which symbolize the synergy between the theoretical upper rung and the practical lower rung. If teachers can creatively connect the teaching material to the felt needs of the students, then the information takes root. But if the students don't see their learning as relevant to the “struggles along the path of life” (23), then the conceptual truths do not remain with the student and the entire educational endeavor is for naught.

Plueddemann demonstrates the use of the rail fence system in the New Testament. When Jesus met an individual, he often listened to their story first, learning about the “bottom rung.” Only then did Jesus offer higher truth that connected to the lived reality of his interlocutor. As the author explores these biblical principles, he takes readers into university classrooms and shady spots under trees, where he himself stumbled over his own inability to initially identify



students' personal bottom rungs. Plueddemann follows his own model as he teaches us by alternating between abstraction and personal stories that bring the message home.

In subsequent chapters, readers follow the author's sure steps as he expands his central premise. He emphasizes, for instance, that "effective teaching demands that the teacher be as well versed in the learner's culture as in the subject matter. *To be a teacher of students, one must first be a student of students*" (30). This exhortation is crucial when teachers enter cultures different from their own. Teachers must learn what their students care about and what their goals and life situations are so that they can craft relevant connections (fence posts) to the material they are presenting. Also, the teacher must learn about expected teaching styles and perceptions of educators by students, all while trying to understand whether the culture is high- or low-context, gauging the community's tolerance to uncertainty, and so forth. Only then will educators be able to determine what to teach and how to teach it. The end goal of teaching, Plueddemann asserts, is *human development*, and in each culture this looks different.

As reader-pilgrims, traveling over the terrain of cross-cultural education, we encounter new phenomena. For instance, the author also takes us through the "Swamp of Struggle." He explains that struggle is an effective learning catalyst, saying that "We learn most profoundly when life's struggles drive us to seek answers" (92). When students experience disequilibrium in their lives, either from experiential crises or from a misalignment of expectations and reality, their curiosity is piqued and attention is available. Teaching through struggle is so effective that Plueddemann suggests trying to find areas of tension in a student's life and tethering the top rung of ideas to connections that lead to the resolutions of these issues. Plueddemann describes his own struggles with the conundrum of predestination and free will as described in the Bible. For many years, he puzzled that Scripture supported both sides of the issue, and he found resolution only when he learned about two pillars of the Christian faith, John Wesley and George Whitefield, who held opposing views but were able to work together in evangelism. The author cites Jesus as a teacher who "caused disequilibrium in his hearers with sayings and parables they didn't understand" (91). In our current era of stark ideological conflict, Plueddemann offers hope that disagreements can serve as launchpads for learning and growth rather than debilitating triggers.

One topic that merits deeper discussion is the question of cultural goals of students. The author is willing to be flexible within a given culture *as long as* he is still able to follow his own education goal of "holistic human development" (3). To ground this idea Plueddemann references the Gospel of Luke and notes that Jesus "grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52) and that Samuel too "continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people" (1 Samuel 2:26). For the author, the principle of integrated human development comes from Scripture. As a result, he believes it to be unequivocally correct—though this is a point on which other culturally sensitive educators might disagree. After all, if you're teaching in a culture for which rote memorization (without actual development, as per Plueddemann's use of the term) has been the accepted method for a long time, it would seem most honoring of that culture to submit to its preferred teaching and learning methods rather than force your own convictions, even if gently, on them.

I have seen this work out in my experience teaching across cultures. As a facilitator leading a seminar on *lectio divina* (“sacred seeing”) for a group of young people in Hong Kong, I relied on the rail fence model to connect the importance of contemplation with the daily struggle of finding inner peace in a bustling city. In addition, I gained insight into why I tend to shy away from asking questions, realizing that I come from a high power-differential culture in which asking questions is perceived as a threat to power.

Plueddemann’s writing mirrors the recent edition’s book cover design: playful, direct, vibrant., His prose is full of colorful examples from around the world. And just as the cover texture is an unexpected, rubbery velvet—something that tactilely beckons the reader to hold the book and explore further—the content invites further exploration as well., I commend this volume without hesitation to all educators working in cross-cultural settings, regardless of whether or not their instruction pertains to mission, as the subtitle suggests, or another topic. *Teaching across Cultures* is well-argued and coherent, not to mention delightfully useful.