Student Perceptions of the Integration of Faith, Learning, and Practice In a Selected Education Course

Larry D. Burton, Ph.D. burton@andrews.edu

Constance C. Nwosu, Ph.D. ccnwosu@cauc.ca

Abstract: This paper presents the results of a study conducted in a Christian teacher education program, which describes students' perceptions of the integration of faith, learning, and practice in education courses. The study answers the following questions:

- 1. How do students define the integration of faith and learning (IFL)?
- 2. Is there consensus among the students' evaluations of the presence of IFL in the class?
- 3. What specific examples of IFL occurrences do students identify from the class?
- 4. How do students perceive the relative value of different experiences in helping them integrate Christian principles and professional practice?
- 5. Does IFL in education courses help students outside of the class being studied? Data were collected from three sections of an elementary teaching methods course taught by the same professor between Fall Semester 1999 and Fall Semester 2000. Data were aggregated for analysis. The student responses help us understand their perceptions of the unity of truth within the context of an elementary education course. The study provides tentative evidence of which types of learning experiences are efficacious in helping students integrate faith and learning.

Background

The integration of faith and learning (IFL) is a critical issue on Christian campuses. However, when the topic is discussed, it is often in the context of philosophical terminology instead of classroom realities. Shortly after one such discussion in a virtual discussion forum some members of the on-line community requested that they be "unsubscribed" from the list serve. They were tired of pursuing a discussion with no practical implications.

The reality for K-12 and college teachers alike seems to be that everyone talks about the importance of IFL, but few persons describe what it is or how to do it. Often when IFL is described or defined, the definitions are generated by scholars in the field or by participants in IFL workshops or classes. Definitions of IFL generated by Christian college professors tend to fall into three categories: intellectual definitions, lifestyle definitions, and discipleship definitions (Nwosu, 1999). But what do *students* say about IFL? What do they say happens

when they experience IFL in the classroom? Do our students think IFL makes a difference beyond the class in which it occurs? Extending the study of IFL to include students' perspectives can provide a rich source of practical data to help Christian teacher educators approach IFL in their classes with confidence.

Research Questions

This study investigated the idea of the integration of faith and learning from the student's perspective. The study was guided by the following questions:

- 1. How do students define the integration of faith and learning (IFL)?
- 2. Is there consensus among the students' evaluations of the presence of IFL in the class?
- 3. What specific examples of IFL occurrences do students identify from the class?
- 4. How do students perceive the relative value of different experiences in helping them integrate Christian principles and professional practice?
- 5. Does IFL in education courses help students outside of the class being studied?

Methodology

Since the research questions that guided this study relied on obtaining students' perceptions of the integration of faith and learning, they were best answered through the use of survey research methodology. Survey methods allowed the researchers to collect qualitative and descriptive data that conveyed students' perceptions. The survey instrument is described below and appended to this paper.

Sampling and Data Collection Protocol

The participants in this study were students in one of the researchers' education classes.

The students in this class were a mixture of graduate and undergraduate students seeking

elementary teacher certification. The course was an elementary education methods course that presented teaching methods for science, social studies, and religion. This course is designed as an integrated experience, presenting methodology that can be used across these three subject areas. Little or no differentiation is made between the assignments for "science", "social studies," or "religion."

The survey instrument was administered during one of the regularly scheduled class sessions for the course. When distributing the survey, the professor told the students that, as a Christian teacher, he was interested in knowing how well he was integrating Christian principles into his classes. The official university evaluations had only one item that addressed this topic. Therefore, he was interested in getting a deeper understanding of how his students perceived the integration of faith in his class.

Students were required to complete the survey as a self-assessment assignment for the course. However, the letter of consent explained that students were not required to participate in the research aspect of the self-assessment. Students were also assured, in the consent letter, that they would not be penalized for refusing to participate in the research project. Students completed the survey in the classroom setting. The survey took approximately20 minutes for the students to complete. Students who were absent during the administration of the survey instrument were asked to complete the instrument as a make-up assignment on their own time.

The instrument was administered each term the researcher taught this class (Fall 1999, Summer 2000, and Fall 2000). Data was collected over these terms and aggregated to provide a richer data set for analysis. A total of 46 students completed the survey during the three terms under study. Two students elected not to participate in the research study, while 44 students (95.7%) agreed to participate in the study.

Questionnaire Design

The researchers developed the survey instrument used in this study. In addition to collecting demographic information, the survey instrument study asked students to describe their understanding of IFL, to indicate whether or not IFL had occurred in the class, and to identify how IFL had occurred. Response types included checklist, open response, and Likert-style formats.

The survey instrument was created through the following process. The investigators created items based on their expertise in IFL, survey research methodology, and qualitative research. This involved creation of a greater number of items than that needed for the instrument. The investigators then selected the items which best focused on study's research questions. In order to assure the content validity of the instrument, two additional experts in IFL and qualitative research reviewed these items. The complete instrument is appended to this paper.

Analysis of the Data

Data were analyzed using descriptive and qualitative approaches. Descriptive analysis techniques were used for aggregating demographic data as well as processing the data for answering Research Questions 2 and 5. Qualitative analysis was performed on data to answer Research Questions 1, 3, and 4. The three sections of this class were treated as a single case for qualitative analysis. The responses from each section of the course were compared to see if they could reasonably be aggregated into a single case. After perusing the data, the researchers judged that the data was similar enough to warrant aggregation. After the qualitative analysis was completed, without exception, the discrete categories and groupings contained data from at least two of the course sections.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, "How do students define the integration of faith and learning (IFL)?" To get this data, the survey instrument asked students to respond to this question, "How would you define/describe the integration of faith and learning?" No definitions of IFL had been provided to students as a part of the class, so it is assumed that these definitions reflect the student's personal interpretation of IFL.

All forty-four students responded to this question. Their responses fit into six different categories that we labeled (1) Learning Processes, (2) Making Connections, (3) Parallel Processing, (4) Atmosphere, (5) Faith Application, and (6) Foundational. Six definitions were expressed more broadly than others and were each placed in two categories. Thus the analysis presents a total of 50 definitions in the six categories. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of definitions within these categories.

Learning Processes. The largest group of definitions (n=20) fit in the category labeled Learning Processes. Definitions in this category described IFL in terms of specific teaching methodologies, such as cooperative learning. One student described IFL as the "incorporation of Christian worldview into [the] process of learning." Another described IFL as ". . . the process of incorporating Christian principles, values, and beliefs into learning/the classroom setting."

Definitions in this category tend to convey an understanding of IFL in terms of process (how it is accomplished) rather than concept (what it is). For one student in this category, IFL consisted of "opportunities to help people share their thoughts and feelings in a secure, trustworthy environment. Opportunities to listen to the opinions [given] by others.

Opportunities to reflect and clarify our thoughts about God, our world, our beliefs and longings,

etc." (This definition was also classified in the "Atmosphere" category.) Another student defined IFL "as combining learning strategies with values and faith in Christ. It is a combination where faith and learning can be accomplished at the same time." (This definition was also classified in the "Parallel Processing" category.)

Some definitions in this category alluded to the specific teaching processes the professor used in teaching the class. For example, "faith and learning are a mentally and physically active process[es]. What occurs mentally will show physically." This definition alludes to teaching approaches, such as Corners and Continuum, which require student to combine physical movement with their intellectual activity.

Making Connections. Nine students' definitions were placed in the category labeled Making Connections. Definitions in this category described IFL in terms of making explicit connections between faith and subject area matter. One student described IFL in this way, "using Christian examples in your teaching or causing one to think about their faith/Christianity." Another student said, "incorporating biblical concepts into the classroom and class lessons/discussions, as well as values and character education." (This definition was also classified as "Teaching Processes.") Other definitions focused more on connecting biblical concepts and principles to the *curriculum*, such as "incorporating religion and world views into the curriculum."

Atmosphere. IFL as classroom environment was the focus of seven students' definitions. These students defined IFL in terms of a positive classroom environment where Christian values are modeled in actions and attitudes. One student expressed it as "the verbal and non-verbal actions that occur in the classroom, based on the teacher's actions, along with the classroom atmosphere." Comments that fit in this category indicate that IFL requires Christian principles to

be evident in classroom environment. One definition described IFL as "learning academics in an environment filled with Gospel Spirit."

Parallel Processing. Some students viewed IFL as the parallel processing of spiritual and intellectual thinking. These six students considered IFL to be a marriage of faith and learning with no separation between the two. Examples of definitions from this category include the following:

I would describe integration of faith and learning as the method in which you can accomplish both tasks at the same time. It is when you take curriculum content and add an experience or life issue that relates to it. This helps students remember the facts and it also helps them evaluate their values and beliefs (faith).

I think it is the growth of one's spirituality and intellect at the same time (sometimes during the same activity).

I define integration of faith and learning as a marriage: Your faith is expressed as you learn and as you are teaching.

Faith Application. The five definitions in this grouping refer to IFL in terms of practical application in the life of teacher and students. Definitions in this category emphasize IFL as a process that transfers from the academic into personal life. For example, "the integration of faith and learning is when Christ-centered concepts and values are integrated in the curriculum as well as practiced in the daily lives of the faculty and students. These definitions tend to describe faith-based behaviors that would be observable by others: "learning a subject more than what's taught in the book. It is rather integrating it with our personal life and how Jesus would react in a particular situation." Another student described the integration of faith and learning as "combining words, values, and character education to other areas or subjects. Students apply the faith to what they learned or vice versa."

Foundational Three students defined IFL in terms of the primacy of faith over all knowledge, or faith as the organizing construct for knowledge. "I would define integration of faith and learning as using my faith as a foundation for learning. This means that my learning experiences will be stimulated by and organized around my faith beliefs." A second student said IFL "is the incorporation of Christian concepts into everyday life. It is more than worship and Bible class. It is weaving God through the fabric of all subjects."

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked, "Is there consensus among the students' evaluations of the presence of IFL in the class?" Data to answer this question were collected from the second question on the survey instrument. It asked students, "Do you think that integration of faith and learning occurred in this class?" Students indicated their responses by placing a check mark on a blank line next to the words "Yes" or "No." Forty-four students responded to this item. All 44 respondents indicated "yes" IFL had occurred in this class. For this class, Elementary Methods for Science, Social Studies, and Religion, students were unanimous in their perceptions that they had experienced IFL in the class.

Research Question 3

The third Research Question asked, "What specific examples of IFL occurrences do students identify from the class?" Students were asked to complete a T-Chart to get at the answers to this question. A T-Chart is a graphic organizer designed to help persons describe an abstract concept. The organizer has two columns. The first column contains examples of what a person would *see* if they observed the concept in action. The second column contains examples of what a person would *hear* if they observed the concept in action. The survey instrument asked students to describe what IFL looked like and sounded like in this class.

Student responses from the T-Chart were placed in five categories: (1) Teaching and Learning Activities, (2) Classroom Climate, (3) Worship, (4) Collaboration, and (5) Resources. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of student responses within these categories.

Teaching and Learning Processes. The largest of these categories was Teaching and Learning Activities with 154 references by students. This large category could be subdivided into two main groups, discussion with 97 references and teaching processes with 48 references. Students said they knew IFL was happening when they heard "Discussions (hum of voices)" and persons "sharing inner thoughts [with the] class." Comments such as "He has done ____ for me" and "I believe" were also an important part of their IFL experience. One key to IFL in this class was the ability for "people [to]express their opinions without reservations." Students describe their IFL experience with the following phrases as well, "engaging," "sharing biblical perspectives," "thoughtful faces," "listening attentively," and "openness (body language)."

In describing their experience with IFL, students generated 48 references to teaching processes used by the professor in teaching the class. Some students referenced complex teaching strategies such as inquiry training ("Creation of biblical discrepant events), role play ("actors up front" or "enacting tough situations with biblical undertones), or inductive thinking ("comparison of God's names"). Other descriptions referred to the response techniques used by the professor to promote interaction within the class ("people moving and making a stand on an issue," "ranking, voting," and "standing in corner listening to others' belief"). From these students' perspectives, the methodology used in teaching the course had major influence on their experience in integrating faith and learning.

Classroom climate. The second largest category of specific examples of what IFL looked like or sounded like in this class was classroom climate. This category included 107

references. This large category could be separated into the following subdivisions: positive climate, peer support, and physical contact.

The largest number of these examples was in the positive climate subcategory with 59 references. Twenty-five comments in this area referred to appropriate laughter in the classroom, i.e. laughter (at right time), while 17 referred to smiling in class. Seventeen examples described a pleasant classroom where students were free to express a variety of emotions. These included comments such as "forgetting about all other work when entering this class," "relaxed friendly atmosphere," "secureness," and "Do you want to go with us to get a Popsicle?"

IFL was described in terms of peer support by 39 references. Students most often described these as "encouraging words" or specific words of affirmation and support that had been spoken in the class. Students wrote such phrases as "You look overwhelmed. Do you need to talk about it?," "Can you please help me? I don't understand.", "You stay here and get ready while I go do that for you.", and "How can I help you?"

Students also associated their IFL experience in this class with physical contact. They used phrases such as "people holding hands," "hugging," "arms around each other," and "pat on the back" eleven times in their T-Charts.

Worship. The third category of descriptions of IFL fell into the category of worship. This category included 70 references that described class devotions and prayer. Students mentioned prayer most often (51 references) using such phrases as "people praying," "eyes closed," "prayer requests," and "praises of thanks." In describing class devotional exercises as examples of IFL, students mentioned "singing," "reading from the Bible," "worship," and "devotions."

Collaboration. In describing their IFL experience, students identified their collaboration with peers in functional cooperative groups 48 times. Comments, such as, "sharing responsibilities" and "people working together in a trust atmosphere" were interpreted by students as being an important part of IFL. Students used additional phrases to describe the role of collaboration in promoting IFL: "cooperative groups talking over differences without argument," "teamwork," "waiting your turn," and "getting along with others" were listed as examples of IFL in action.

Resources. Students referred to resources in the classroom as promoting IFL 17 times. Most of the references were to Biblical resources such as "Bible in hands of leaders", "Bibles on desk", and "visual aids of Bible verses." Other resources such as "paper cutouts/artwork," "overheads," and "textbooks" were mentioned by students as well.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked, "How do students perceive the relative value of different experiences in helping them integrate Christian principles and professional practice?" Data to answer this question was collected through a listing of in-class and out-of-class experiences for students to rate with a Likert-style response format. Students rated each of these items by responding to the following prompt: "To what extent did the following help you to integrate your Christian principles in your chosen profession/discipline?" Table 1 lists all items rated by the students and the mean rating each received.

Not surprisingly, students placed in-class experiences at the top of the list. The only out-of-class experience whose mean was above 4.00 was "Interaction with professor outside of class." While that is an out-of-class experience, it is still closely tied to the overall class experience. This data highlights the important role played by the professor when integrating

faith and learning. Three of the top four items are specifically tied to the professor; two of them are explicitly connected to the professor's 'personhood.'

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 asked, "Does IFL in education courses help students outside of the class being studied?" Data for this question were collected by Question 6 on the survey instrument, which asked, "How has the integration of faith and learning in this class helped you beyond the classroom?" This question was not included in the original survey instrument administered to the Fall 1999 class in this study. It was added to the instrument in 2000. As a result the number of responses for this item (n=29) is lower than for other items reported in this study.

Student responses clustered in four categories: professional impact, edification, the IFL concept, and personal spirituality. The data in response to this question is rich and lends itself to drawing meaning both within these established categories and across all categories. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of responses within these categories.

Professional Impact. Twelve of the students indicated that their IFL experience in this class would affect the way they functioned as professional educators. They indicated that it would change the way they taught in both school and church. Pre-service teachers made comments such as, "It has opened my eyes to see how our classrooms are going to be," "it has helped me in my teaching philosophy. I also plan to integrate faith in learning," and "I intend to teach in [a Christian] school and this class was taught from [a Christian] perspective. Practicing teachers who were taking the class to update their teaching credentials described the immediate changes they planned for the next term. Their comments included the following. "It shows [me] different ways in which I can make religion more interesting. My students have in the past been

bored with religious topics taught in the books." "I am excited about trying these techniques." "My [church] class may never be the same. Neither will my worships at school or my subject matter lessons too."

Edification. The next largest number of responses (n=7) indicated that IFL in this class had edified them or their relationships in specific ways. Some responses explained how their experience in this class had helped in their families: "with my family – to be quiet and open to what they're trying to tell me; to ask more questions; to respect their thoughts more" and "at home we are consciously aware of prayer and thoughtfulness." Others explained how their IFL experience in this class had helped edify their relationships with friends: "encouraging to know you have friends that pray with/for you," "I know that my classmates are praying for me, and that comforts me," and "I've learned that once I really get to know someone, it's impossible not to like them."

IFL concept. The third group of comments about how the IFL experience in this class would help students outside of class focused on the concept of IFL itself. Five student indicated that their experience in this class had helped clarify, confirm, or deepen their understanding of IFL. Their comments included, "clarification of the meaning of IFL," "deeper understanding of IFL," "confirmation of personal beliefs re: IFL," and "it reiterates to me how we can't really compartmentalize God and/or our spiritual life. They impact all of our life. We are forever learning if we breathe, and if we are a Christian it will show or not in every corner of our life." Another student wrote, "I can see that integrating faith and learning can be a natural involvement. It doesn't have to be hard work."

Personal Spirituality. A fourth group of students (n=5) described how their IFL experience in this class had affected their personal spiritual life. One student commented, "It has

helped in my own spiritual journey." Another said, "I feel it extended my learning further than most classes – it makes our faith more valuable." One student indicated the effect it had on his thinking about God, "It has made me think deeper about my personal walks with God and more appreciative of what God has done for me."

Drawing Meaning Across Categories. In looking at the similarities in the data across the categories that were just discussed, we can gain additional insights. Within each of these categories students were communicating certain ideas about how their IFL experience in this class had affected their interpersonal interactions and their relationships.

Interpersonal Interactions. The data in each of the four categories communicates students' perceptions of how this class experience has altered their interactions. Within the Professional Impact group, the focus is on professional interactions, that is, interactions with students and colleagues. Within the Edification group, the data describes interactions with peers and family. In the IFL Concept category, the focus is on intrapersonal interactions, that is, personal reflections upon the concept of IFL. The data within the Personal Spirituality category focuses on interactions with God. It appears that the data is saying that involvement in the IFL experience within this class has affected students' interpersonal interactions in one arena or another.

Relationships. Data across the categories also indicates that this class experience has affected students' relationships. The data from the Professional Impact category indicates that students in this class believe their IFL experience will affect their relationships with their students and colleagues. Data from the Edification category indicates that students think this experience will affect their relationships with peers and family. Within the IFL Concept group, the data suggests that students believe that this class will affect how they understand

relationships between faith and life. Responses in the Personal Spirituality category indicate that students believe their class experience will affect their relationships with God.

Implications of the Findings

Teaching and Learning Approaches. The data collected in this research study and the analysis of the data displays internal consistency. In answering the four major research questions in this study, #1, 3, 4, and 5, students placed a greater emphasis on teaching and learning processes than any other category of response. Thus the data indicate that IFL may be connected to the teaching approaches used in the class. Students repeatedly referred to active involvement and interaction with peers as key elements of their IFL experience in this class. For these students, IFL involved a process of small group and whole class discussions which led to intense small group bonding and whole-class esprit de corps as well.

Many students mentioned devotional sessions and prayer as being key experiences for integrating faith and learning in this class. However, their responses clearly indicate, that for them, IFL is more than reading a devotional thought and having prayer at the beginning of class. These students expressed an appreciation of classroom learning activities that pressed them to take a deeper look at Christian principles within the context of their chosen profession.

Student Expectations/Recognition. Responses in this study indicate that students in Christian higher education expect IFL to occur in their classes. This was communicated through comments such as, "being on a Christian campus makes it expected" and "part of [the] uniqueness of our campus is that we study Christ and that we honor Him daily/regularly." These same students believe they can recognize IFL when it occurs. One student phrased it like this: "I know it occurred because you could see it and hear it from other people in class. Everyone had a story or an example to share that showed they integrated." A second student said, "I know

it occurred because my faith has increased. I have also learned how to have students evaluate their faith through value lessons." A third student in describing what "triggered" IFL for her stated, "The thing that triggered it was working with my group. At first I don't think we got along, but we learned cooperation, and now we actually like each other! For me, that was definitely integration of faith and learning because it took our faith in God and Christian character [traits] to get us to learn together."

Thus, it appears as professors in Christian higher education we bear a three-fold responsibility for integrating faith and learning in our classes. First, we feel a personal responsibility to integrate faith in our classes. Next, our administrators and constituents expect it. But perhaps most importantly, our students expect it from us.

Classroom Climate. Repeatedly in the data, students emphasized the importance of the classroom atmosphere in supporting the integration of faith and learning. "Atmosphere" emerged as one of the primary categories when students defined IFL. "Classroom climate" was the second largest category when students listed specific occurrences of IFL in the class. Several of the items rated as most valued by the students could be considered a part of the classroom climate. Examples include "professor's caring attitude," and classroom devotional exercises, and "small group discussions." While climate did not emerge as the strongest theme in this research, students clearly communicated that IFL could not occur if the classroom environment had not been open, accepting, supporting, and encouraging.

The Professor's Role. Because of his pervasive influence in creating the classroom climate, the professor's role could be discussed within the context of the classroom climate. However, we have chosen to discuss it as a separate topic because of the importance students ascribe to it. Repeatedly throughout the data, students referred to the importance of the

professor's role in achieving the integration of faith and learning. Two of the most valued items students perceived as important for helping them integrate their faith and learning were "professor's caring attitude" and "professor's exemplary life." These items have more to do with who a professor *is* than what the professor does. This is a sobering thought for us as college professors, especially in light of James 3:1: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (NIV).

But the encouraging news is that the data shows that it is possible to design a course that integrates faith and learning with specific content knowledge. The students in this class indicate that from their perspective the integration of faith in the course was as seamless as the integration of methodologies for three subject areas that have traditionally been considered "separate." What is required of the professor is a *commitment* to work at integrating faith in his courses and the *planning time* needed to create a course that uses active learning approaches to facilitate IFL.

Suggestions for Further Research

We consider this to be the first step in our investigation of IFL from a student's perspective. We are interested in pursuing the following extensions of this research:

- Replicate this study in additional college level courses taught by the same professor and conduct cross-case analyses using each separate course as a case..
- Replicate this study in college-level classes taught by additional professors and conduct cross-case analyses of the data using each professor as a case.
- Conduct additional studies to refine the instrument, with the goal of creating a valid and reliable scale for student perceptions of IFL

An Invitation to Join the Inquiry

Faculty members interested in joining this project should contact either of the authors.

In-class/ Out of class	Response Prompt	mean	n=
I	Professors= caring attitude	4.76	44
I	Classroom devotional exercises by the teacher	4.41	44
I	Classroom devotional exercises by fellow students	4.41	44
I	Professors= exemplary life	4.41	44
I	Small group discussions	4.34	44
I	Classroom discussion of ethical issues in my discipline	4.34	44
I	Whole class discussions	4.32	44
О	Interaction with professor outside of class	4.25	44
I	Projects/presentations	4.19	43
I	Professors= lectures	4.02	44
О	*Work/job-related experiences	4.00	25
О	*Church-related activities (worship services, chapels, etc)	3.96	25
I	Micro-teaching (item dropped after first administration)	3.82	17
О	*Social activities	3.80	25
I	Written assignments/papers, etc.	3.70	44
О	Working with peers on assignments outside of class time	3.65	40
О	Professional conferences	3.53	34
Open-ended items with few responses			
О	Other helpful experiences	5.00	3
I	Other in-class	4.88	8
О	*Outreach programs such as:	4.33	6

^{*}items added after first survey administration

Table 1. Mean Scores for Experiences That Helped Integrate Faith and Learning

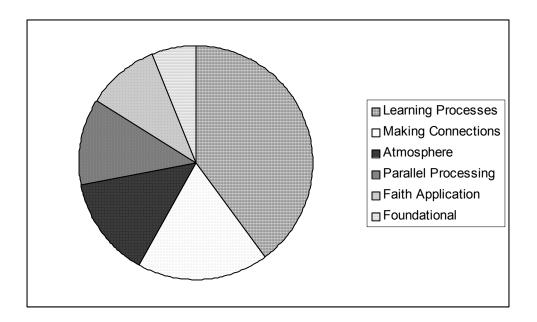


Figure 1. Research Question 1 – Categories of Students' Definitions of IFL

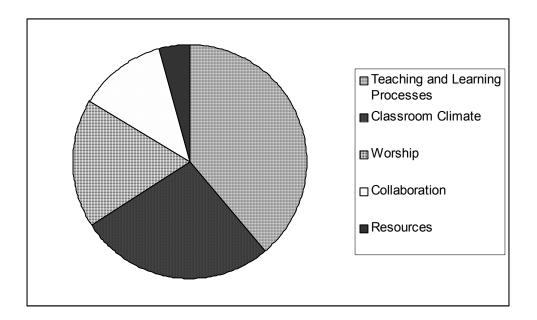


Figure 2. Research Question 3 – Categories of Students' Examples of IFL

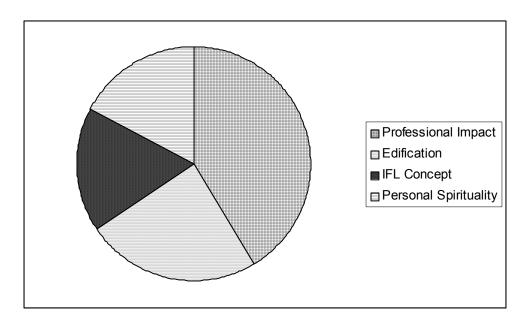


Figure 3. Research Question 5 – Areas of Impact Outside of Class

Student Perceptions of the Integration of Faith, Learning, and Practice In a Selected Education Course

Presented at the Fifth Biennial Symposium Coalition of Christian Teacher Educators (CCTE) "Educating for Life"

May 24, 2002 Calvin College

Larry D. Burton, Ph.D.
Andrews University
United States of America
burton@andrews.edu

Constance C. Nwosu, Ph.D.
Canadian University College
Canada
ccnwosu@cauc.ca