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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Student Participation in Class and Professors as Teachers, Mind/Heart Readers, and (Perhaps) Therapists

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

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Like many teachers, I was trained to expect student's participation in the classroom to be many things at once: prepared, right on the issue at stake, ready to offer deep insights and if possible, be passionate. I also was trained to exclude the needs and subjective experiences of my students, expecting them to bracket their suffering, their sorrows, and their traumas, at least during class time. Oh, and I was trained to expect students to be as text-based as I am, even though reading habits have changed. I still resent it when the connections made in class are not related to the texts. After a while, it is so easy to catch students who are just pretending that they have read or make a comment based on a line on page 78 without having actually read the text. I get really frustrated when students don't read the assigned texts or when they are not fully present, having their hearts and minds elsewhere. All of these forms of participation in class demand practical responses from the professors that are not as clear as we might hope.

Let me give an example: one day a student offered a harsh critique of the book we were reading. I asked him to name what in the book he didn't like. After 3 attempts to continue with his critique, it was clear he didn't read a thing. What do I do? Call him out in front of everyone? Talk to him in private? Wait until the end of the semester?

Other forms of participation, or non-participation, are part of the experience of the class. Students who "participate" by sleeping in class, or using their phones and computers. There is

the gaze of the one who is checking emails and looking at Facebook. And there are the smiles, facial reactions, and even laughter when they are texting. All this is why I tend not to let students use computers or phones during class. But how to do that when the readings are on their computers, or when the cares of the world are (often) more compelling than what our students find in our classrooms? When we have only their bodies, and not their minds and hearts and spirits, passions and convictions, strong yesses and necessary nos, then what? Maybe we have to be open to the possibility that some of our students are part of conversations they cannot tell us unless we ask and are open to what we will hear.

Besides the objective forms of grading participation regarding reading texts, there is so much more that is at stake when our students are in the classroom.

I had a student who would sleep every day in my class. For a long while, I thought about sending him an email saying he couldn't make this class his bedroom. But then, I decided to talk to him personally. We met and he then told me that life had been very difficult for him, that he was working overtime to take care of his unemployed mother, his little brother, and teenage sister. He apologized. What do I do? Tell him if he continues this way he cannot pass? Find ways to help him when I don't have time to help? Keep him in the class for as long as I can until he resolves his problems?

Another student was quiet all the time. Couldn't speak. Talking to her I learned she was going through very difficult personal times, but couldn't say what it was. She kept quiet. What to do? Flunk her? After the semester was over she decided to talk to me and told me she had become pregnant but had lost the baby. She could not make sense of her life, and the only places she found some sort of sustenance, relief and perhaps even coherence was the classes she took that semester, including mine.

Another student received the news that his mother was terminally ill. He missed more classes than he was allowed in order to pass this class. What was I supposed to do?

Objectively speaking, knowledge is a composition of several issues. Knowledge is not only about the present of abstract thinking but also by what is around us, with its feelings and emotions, the composition of social classes, objects and images used, sensations around expectations, fears and hopes, general conditions of life. The best forms of learning are the ones that can integrate all these aspects of life in direct and/or transversal ways. But for students in crisis, the 'best forms of learning' may require each teacher to bend a bit, to listen a little longer, to walk with the student an extra mile as she is able.

Does that mean that every teacher needs to be a therapist or a chaplain? Yes and no. Perhaps more yes than no? Well, yes because when we teach we are teaching about the whole life and not only about the specifics of a certain discipline/knowledge. Even the specifics of a certain knowledge influences the whole way of living. And no, absolutely no, since we are not professionals in these areas, and we do not have the required formation, and cannot offer the appropriate care.

In classrooms, there are so many borders to negotiate and fundamental boundaries that must be kept and honored. To deal with each case that arises in our classrooms is always so difficult to discern. But if I am unwilling to listen, or if I am captive to my objective model of learning, I may be injuring my students while professing rigor, standards, and policies.

How teachers and students learn together is a *wonder* for me! How we survive a whole time together is a *mystery* to me! And when we witness transformed lives is a *miracle* to me! These truths are sometimes too much for me. For you, too?

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/06/teachers-as-therapists/>