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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Suppose Life-Giving Conversations Necessitate Exclusivity?

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In a low and pensive voice, the young woman student posed her question to the all-women course. Her question sent a gentle shockwave through the room. After some far ranging discussion, my response to her question was this - "Black women all over the world make passionate love all night long, and then in the morning, go to their jobs looking fabulous!" I admit that I had never previously had this kind discussion in a classroom, but I was intrigued. I was, with this conversation, in uncharted territory in my own classroom discussion - and loving every moment of it!

There are reasons, good reasons, why discussion is not a preferable learning activity in higher education. Teachers know from experience that discussion leans toward the will and want of the student. Discussions can and do "get out of hand." Discussions can move into territory not on the syllabus or beyond the scope of expertise of the teacher. Methods to control and orchestrate classroom conversation are in all of our teaching repertoires.

We must resist thinking of the moments of questions after a lecture as "discussion." A posed question and a response is not a conversation. Q & A is not discussion.

As a professor in a seminary, it has been apparent to me for many years that students come to class with “churchy” agendas and “churchified” discussions. Students are well aware of the standards of “acceptable” discussions. Students also have the habit of making a study of the teacher as much or more than they study the topic at-hand. In the study of the teacher, the student makes a concerted effort to ask questions and provide answers which are a match to the sensitivities of the teacher. In these instances, the lesson of the learner has more to do with mimicking the masks and personas of the teacher than exposing and plumbing her own curiosity. Some teachers enjoy this gaslighting.

Given the pitfalls and dangerous possibilities, I still work hard to engineer conversations in my classrooms which will be life changing, thought provoking, and courage summoning. Wielding the transformative power of deep conversation is my cautious aim. I want to engineer conversations which evoke astonishment and amazement. I want my students to experience, as I have experienced, conversations which heal, convict, and rescue. I yearn to choreograph conversations which allow students to ask the questions which they are genuinely wondering about, rather than the question they know is acceptable, palatable, and often benign.

When we get it right, discussion can bring a magical kind of encounter resulting in insight, revelation, new perspective. The moments when students listen to and for each other as mutually shared engagement on tough issues is the moment of shared truth and ah-hah! The shared experience, as if something important is being cracked-opened as if new light is entering in, as if the world expanded a tiny bit, is the result of deep, risky discussion.

For two courses, over the last eighteen years, I have had the good fortune of registration exclusively by women. I had not made a Mary Daly rule for registration, so in both instances, I was surprised and delighted. Each time I have taught an all-women course, I have wanted the exclusive presence of women to be more than a novel classroom experience. I wanted the conversation to be substantively different. I wanted to create space for a conversation by women for women about women. In both courses, once I realized registration was exclusively women, I made changes in the syllabus. I rethought the learning activities and created exercises which considered and honored the all-women group. I changed the readings of the course to exclusively readings of women authors. I shifted the cornerstone questions of the course to take into account issues of female identity, femininity, misogyny, and womanist approaches to self, community, and power.

The discussion which evoked my comment about the love making habits of Black woman around the world happened in one of the all women courses. Our discussion about gender and womanhood was provoked by a new learning activity. I had instructed each woman to create a timeline of her own hair. It was a straightforward and simple exercise that uncorked a mammoth discussion.

For those women whose hair had been a living symbol of maturity, personal growth, and participation in beauty culture – this assignment was a guide for recollection, reminiscing, and reflection. For those women whose hair had been a place of ongoing authentication of imposed

inferiority, a constant tethering to a beauty standard which is unyielding in abuse, a site of verification for worthlessness and ugliness, this assignment was fraught with danger, ire, and tales of unhealed wounds.

The political is personal and the personal is political if we can find ways to hold this viscous phenomenon for discussion. Discussing the body is a discussion of creating ourselves, including our politics, and has the potential to teach us how to summon moral courage. A discussion about our hair, for women, is potentially a discussion which moves into the arena of authentic reflection on sexism, racism, classism - the politic of superiority and inferiority which permeates the society. Since the body is the site of gender politics, racial politics, class politics, and the politics of sexual orientation - it is precisely the body which should be discussed.

I am not saying other professors need to ask students to create a hair timeline. I am suggesting that the tool of discussion in our classrooms warrants our deepest attention if we are to move toward the conversations which are politically necessary for social change and healing. In so doing, I want to suggest that conversations among certain particularities are valuable and necessary, yet underutilized in classroom strategies. There is great merit in discussions on race and racism among only-white students. There is tremendous benefit for all-male groups to discuss issues of sexism and misogyny. I am a witness that the all-women conversation in two courses was life-giving.

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