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The Privilege of Good Enough? Challenges of Radical Hospitality in Theological Education

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Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

November 09, 2017

Tags: student learning | critical reflection | hospitality

Is my teaching good enough? Is your teaching good enough? I believe that good enough teaching and learning are practices of radical hospitality that are needed more than ever today in a political climate of American exceptionalism, increasingly divisive civil discourse, and passionate if conflicting longings to be “great.” While I hope to promote excellence in my work, I don’t ask students for greatness over and above their peers in my classroom; rather, I aim for a learning environment in which every student believes they are good enough to be there.

I believe that learning in a group is more possible and probable when the learner experiences themselves not as necessarily better or less than other learners, but rather as good enough, believing that they belong and therefore can participate in learning.

However, many students and teachers do not believe they are good enough – a fear that has been communicated through previous learning experiences from pre-school to Ph.D. processes. Believing oneself to be good enough – a requirement for teaching and learning in my opinion – functions like other privileges, available to some more than others and laced with relative power and opportunity.

Good Enough?

What exactly is good enough? With multiple connotations, this phrase “good enough” is easily misunderstood. In my field of pastoral theology, good enough is a practice of radical hospitality that opens participants to relationships of appropriate support and challenge. D.W. Winnicott, a leading thinker in object-relations psychological theory, imagined good enough practice as responsible and responsive, neither rigidly perfectionistic nor negligently unmotivated.

Here’s how I explain the concept in my pastoral theology syllabus: “Pastoral theology continues to view the modern psychologies as offering tools for understanding care. One of the most helpful metaphors that pastoral theology has adopted is that of the *good enough* participant in caregiving. This is *not* to say that care involves minimal effort. Rather, pastoral theologians have recognized that it is more helpful to aspire to be a good enough pastoral caregiver than a perfect one. This stance requires *more* effort, attention, and courageous habits of self and communal reflection.”

Good enough is also a helpful concept for pedagogical reflection beyond my academic discipline. By good enough, I mean to indicate a deep sense of value, a seat at the table, a voice considered a worthy conversation partner, a belief in oneself as belonging. Is this possible in classrooms today? For students who do not experience believing themselves to be good enough, both perfectionism and apathy are rational responses. However, neither of these responses is healthy for the learning environment not to mention for the learner.

Bracketing admissions, financial aid, curricula, hiring policies, tension between institutional traditions and commitments, and more for the moment, when I focus on the students eligible to enroll in my class, if I am committed to good enough teaching, I need to ask how hospitable my teaching is to different learners—especially in this politically divisive moment. Have I designed a class in which students are able to believe they belong? Can each willing participant be good enough? What are some challenges to this kind of radical hospitality in theological education? Which boundaries are required for this kind of radical hospitality and which boundaries must be released?

Three Challenges of Radical Hospitality in Theological Education: Room, Representation, and Respect

In my teaching, I am confronting challenges to radical hospitality whether newly awakened in this political era, as is the case for many of my white colleagues and students in theological education, or held as longstanding concerns, as is the case for colleagues and students who represent and/or are committed to be in relationship with communities with histories of exclusion from theological education.

Specific practices of radical hospitality, such as room, representation, and respect, can dismantle good enough as a privilege in order to invite all students to believe in themselves as good enough participants in learning. I think of these practices as disciplines of inquiry and courageous self and communal reflection.

- **Room:** Where is the breathing room in my course design? Is there room in my syllabus

for multiple avenues of earning a course grade? Do students have an opportunity to learn how to succeed in the class through assignments that build over the semester? Have I woven enough practice into course time? Is there room in assignments for students to make connections between the course content and what matters deeply to them?

- **Representation:** What voices and epistemologies are represented in the course texts and in what order? How might different students feel invited into a conversation (imagined or real) with the authors of these texts? Will all students have to stretch in relation to some readings and feel more at home with other readings? How do I represent, include, and compensate epistemologies, voices, and communities deeply relevant to the course of study but that don't have access to academic publishing?
- **Respect:** Does my syllabus avoid unintentional dehumanization? Do I account for the word "we" and define my authoritative access to speak for groups of people from seminary students to human beings to women? Do I coach students in accounting for their use of pronouns? What structures of accountability have I included in the planning, unfolding, and debriefing of my teaching?

Now What?

I need to wrestle with the limits of belonging in my pedagogy to consider how to move more deeply into good enough teaching and learning. I do not think that good enough teaching and learning ought to be a privilege restricted to a small group of learners, professors, and learning environments. Good enough teaching and learning are practices of radical hospitality that swing open wide the opportunities of learning.

If I want to embrace a good enough pedagogy, I will need to become more aware of and willing to address the challenges of radical hospitality in theological education, especially in my classrooms. I believe theological educators can begin to cultivate pedagogies where all learners have access to being good enough by first recognizing challenges to radical hospitality in theological education.

In my next blog, I wonder about dreams, commitments, and strategic practices that invite all learners to believe in themselves as good enough. How have you tried to embody and inspire good enough teaching and learning?

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/11/privilege-good-enough-challenges-radical-hospitality-theological-education/>