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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Engaging Trauma: Setting Expectations for Students

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While there are moments in the classroom in which trauma prevents learning, to suggest that a traumatized student cannot learn turns the classroom into a space that privileges students who are protected from trauma as a result of being rich, white, male, and heterosexual. Accommodating traumatized students is not just an accessibility issue, it is also about teaching and learning in and about the material worlds in which we live.

Rather than thinking about how to get ill or traumatized students out of our classrooms, we need to think about how to make our classrooms more accessible not only for students with visible disabilities but also for students with illnesses, including psychological illness. What are some of the concrete actions faculty can take in order to make classroom spaces more accessible to students with illness, including those with PTSD?

First, faculty members should create learning environments that are accessible to ill and/or traumatized students by, first, establishing clear deadlines well in advance of an assignment due date and, second, being flexible about those deadlines. Flexible deadlines do not change the learning outcomes of the classroom but, rather, offer students the opportunity to complete required work. Ellen Boucher describes how she gives students an automatic two-day grace period on any paper. If a student cannot complete the work by the end of that grace period, they must meet with her in order to review the assignment. Policies such as Boucher's make

learning spaces more accessible not only for students experiencing illness and/or trauma but also for students who have to juggle other life commitments and don't have the privilege of being only a student.

Second, in order to make the classroom more accessible for ill or traumatized students, I recommend that professors use some kind of content or trigger warning for classroom material. For me, this is easily incorporated into the last few minutes of class in which I preview the next class and any upcoming assignments. This preview gives students an opportunity to prepare for upcoming content. Previewing content prior to the class in which it will actually be discussed also gives students an opportunity to approach me individually if they have particular concerns. Trigger and content warnings are not about excusing students but, rather, about helping students prepare to engage difficult content.

Finally, faculty members can make classroom spaces more accessible to traumatized students by holding space during intense or emotional discussions. Stephanie Crumpton describes this method in "Trigger Warnings, Covenants of Presence, and More: Cultivating safe space for theological discussions about sexual trauma." In this article, Crumpton argues that a trauma-sensitive pedagogical strategy includes having grounding exercises prepared. She states, "It is important to have a process in place if the classroom tilts out of balance as stories are shared" (145). Gently walking students back from a text, clip, or argument reminding them of where they are, and holding the space through practices such as asking students to take a deep breath are practices that can help ground students in the moment. This grounding not only enables traumatized students to continue participating in the learning process but also helps other students to realize the gravity of the material.

This is not an exhaustive list of possibilities but incorporating these practices will create a classroom that is both more engaged with material realities and more accessible to students experiencing illness and/or trauma. All of these suggestions, of course, require work on the part of faculty members. This work is, to be frank, often unpaid. Different faculty will have to parse this out depending on institutional contexts and personal needs, but different institutional contexts and/or personal needs are not an excuse to maintain inaccessible classrooms. Making classrooms accessible to the illness and/or trauma already present in the learning experiences of students offers a direct route to "engaged" teaching.

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