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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



One-Layer Removed: A Pedagogical Strategy when Trauma Interrupts

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More than once, a student has reported on a trauma unfolding in real time in the middle of class. Students with laptops open, or phones nearby, have shared breaking news of university lockdowns or school shootings. Just this semester, in the hours surrounding classes, we've seen gun violence and middle school walkouts, women's rights and sexualized violence, police brutality and other forms of racist misuse of power, DACA and the risk and vulnerability of undocumented students, and more.

As a teacher, how does one prepare for what to do next? Part of responding to trauma is preparing to be present in unpredictable moments. Where in the curriculum do students learn whether to interrupt teaching and learning, to rewrite budgets, sermons, pastoral prayers, to scrap programming or lecture content in favor of addressing a trauma at hand?

This year I've experimented more regularly with a strategy I've used occasionally to structure time and space into my courses for the unpredictable. When trauma interrupts class, I often feel compelled to address it. However, I don't always know which issues will trigger which students. Disclosing personal histories of trauma is not something I require nor think should be required. Histories of trauma exist, at all times, in visible and invisible ways. Some new trauma will interrupt, a decision is made about whether or not to address it, and unintended consequences may follow.

A “one-layer removed” pedagogical strategy helps me hold space to respond to trauma that interrupts courses while also protecting students from having to disclose their personal histories or being triggered directly. The strategy structures a simulated conversation about having a conversation about the presenting traumatic event. It’s not the conversation per se, but a directed conversation about the possibility of a more direct conversation at another time and place. Thus, the pedagogical exercise is by design one-layer removed from a trauma that interrupts.

How does it work? The one-layer removed practice requires at least 15 minutes of class time on a regular basis throughout the semester. I divide the class into groups of three with a seeker, a consultant, and an observer (a classic role play design). In larger groups, seekers can tag team or consultants can work together, or observers can share unique observations in turn. The seekers are the students themselves in their actual or imagined future vocational setting. The seeker contacts the consultant(s) about how to address a particular trauma in their ministry setting, practicing collegial consultation with a prompt:

Seeker: Given the topic of class today and the reading we’ve been doing, I want to respond to (fill in the trauma that has interrupted the class in real time or in the local or global community). Can you help me imagine how to do so?

The consultant and seeker discuss possible conversations they imagine having or not having in their ministry, vocational, or other context at another time and space. After 5 minutes, the observer(s) reports about connections they see to the course themes, readings, contextual factors, trigger warnings or concerns, and more. Then, to debrief, the group can join with another group or the whole class can have a brief or longer conversation.

This “one-layer removed” practice highlights three learning goals I have for students in several of my classes: (1) practicing and preparing to remain present when unpredictable care concerns and moral dilemmas arise (2) demonstrating and committing to ongoing courageous self-awareness and leading courageous communal awareness[1] (3) building on this awareness, cultivating a living referral network through practices of relationship-building, consultation, and networking. When trauma infuses public discourse during a semester or even during a class session, a one-layer removed practice helps the class work on all three of these goals.

Here’s an example. This past fall, the #metoo movement arose with renewed energy[2] in which people, particularly women, disclosed experiences of abuse through social media and public protests. It was hard not to notice. In October 2017, I was teaching examples of trinitarian pastoral theology that took seriously intersectional concerns of gender, class, race, and a history of surviving abuse. There were lots of connections between course requirements and collective trauma being disclosed through the #metoo public discourse. In a class session, I used previously set aside one-layer removed practice class time:

Seeker: Given the topic of class this week and the reading we’ve been doing on taking women’s experiences seriously in our theologies of pastoral care and given the eruption of the #metoo movement this week, I am thinking about quoting this prayer[3] in my faith community’s

service this week. Do you think that's wise and how could I frame it?

In the brief but important conversations that emerged, students practiced putting words to something that was painfully very familiar to some and not at all to others. Students considered how various folks with various experiences might receive either these words, other words, or lack of words about #metoo. Students brainstormed the kind of referrals they would need in their pocket that week in their various ministry and nonprofit contexts, no matter what was said or unsaid, about local resources they might print on a service bulletin. We discussed self-care, courageous communal care, and, yes, we incorporated assigned readings on implications for trinitarian pastoral theology and why that mattered.

A one-layer removed pedagogical strategy helps students in my practical and pastoral theology and ethics classes prepare for moments when trauma or other dire care needs interrupt their work as a student, minister, nonprofit leader, or even dinner conversations with family and friends. Increasingly in the last year, as a pastoral theologian, I've been called by friends and strangers both near and far to support communities regarding various traumas. For example, I'm on a non-profit board whose carefully constructed budget had to be completely rethought when violence erupted in our service population. Suddenly we needed to fund emergency counseling and care across multiple countries and communities. Here is just one example where my own lived experiences and the learning outcomes I have for my students aligned: the need to create a referral network *before* you need it.

Trauma will impinge on previously scheduled plans and folks will ask religious and spiritual leaders for advice, expect to hear a word or prayer, and hope to find some assistance in what to do next. I teach graduate students in theological education at the Masters and Doctoral levels and often remind my students that whether or not they see themselves as religious or spiritual leaders, folks who know they are educated in graduate theological education will expect them to be present in significant life and death moments. Where can students practice this in the curriculum? I've found that a pedagogical practice of one-layer removed can offer crucial time and space to practice.

[1] This awareness is important for helping students know which issues are too close to their own experience for them to be a care-provider and therefore need to establish referrals for help with these issues *before* they are needed.

[2] Tanara Burke, longtime supporter of social justice for women and girls of color and founder of the nonprofit organization "JustBeInc," created the "me too" movement to support survivors of sexualized violence a decade before the social media #metoo campaign of 2017 (see for example, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>. See also <http://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/board>).

[3] I provided each group with copies of a blog that had been published that week from Rev. Sarah Griffith Lund at <https://sarahgriffithlund.com/2017/10/18/god-were-you-there-when-metoo/>

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/05/one-layer-removed-a-pedagogical-strategy-when-trauma-interrupts/>