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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Articulate: Collaborative Mid-Term Exam

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

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Justice is one of those ideas that has captured our imaginations for generation upon generation; yet it is still a contested notion. Collectively, systemic racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, white supremacy, and a judicial system that is lenient on "white collar/white male" crime, while vengeful upon the poor and minoritized people, provide ample evidence that justice for some is not justice for all. For these and other reasons, I need my students to be articulate about the notion of justice. It is not enough to "believe in" the idea. It is not enough to agree with it intuitively or "in your heart." Education as a practice of freedom, as a practice of transgression, as a practice of re-humanization, is the theory I teach in my graduate level introductory course. This course insists that the ability to articulate the theories of justice, regardless of personal experience or personal belief, is a pedagogical necessity.

It is the rare student who enters my introductory course able to speak the language of liberative pedagogy or to talk about the connection between education and social transformation. This is why they are learners–there are important things which they do not yet know and which they cannot articulate, but which we can teach them.

My pedagogy of justice is not so interested in teaching skills of "critical thinking." Most of my students have families, are gainfully employed, and have responsibilities in church as well as community. Many own their own businesses, provide support for several generations in and

beyond their households, and are looking to religious leadership as a second or even third career. By the time they reach my "Introduction to Educational Ministries" course they have demonstrated considerable ability to think critically, to problem solve, to engage successfully in tactics of survival.

Rather than "critical thinking," I want to teach my adult learners methods of power analysis necessary for the summoning of moral courage in a society steeped in body politics, violence, and systemic hatreds. I want my students to be praxis thinkers, able to analyze injustice and articulate justice in an unjust society. They must be able, in their own communal context, to analyze white supremacy and patriarchy in its myriad expressions. The healing of their community and the restructuring for a more equitable society depends upon their ability to articulate justice. What I stress in my course is the ability to articulate what justice actually entails in the world. Simply feeling it, believing it, desiring it, hoping for it–just won't do. The power is in speaking it.

Have you ever known something but could not articulate it? You thought you understood it, but did not know the words, the vocabulary, the way to convey the basic concepts with depth? Sometimes, as a consequence of complex experiences, you may find your ability to describe the learnings of that experience to be limited or incomplete. In order to give full voice to your experience, as well as the insights gained from that experience, drawing on the collaborative power that emerges from sustained conversations is a key. Equally, having a firm grasp upon basic theories of justice making and moral courage are imperative. Being able to articulate theories of justice provides a hermeneutical mirror for analysis of, and meaning-making from personal experiences and perspectives.

Finding ways to assist my students with articulating theory and helping them order the learnings of personal experience entails exposure to new vocabulary and interrogation of basic concepts. Personal experience can provide new insights, new understanding of the age-old problem of injustice when communal-reflexive habits are incorporated as a way to animate and elucidate theory. Because, of course, theory and practice are two-sides of the same coin.

On the first day of the course, then reinforced in each subsequent session, I tell my students to pay attention to the argument of the authors we are reading. The focus of reading is not so much deciding if they "like it or not," but noticing the authors' use of vocabulary, basic concepts, and illustrative examples and narratives. I tell them to learn these funky words and use them in and out of class. Once new vocabulary is mastered, the ability to conceive the basic concepts and the ways these concepts create the theory is more evident. I tell them to be able to map the basic concepts of the theory because all basic concepts do not function in the same way to create the theory. When they look puzzled, I teach them concept mapping. Learning to play with theory for praxis is a mighty challenge. I have, over the many years, devised this mid-term learning exercise to assist my students in articulating the basic concepts of the theory we study:

Step One - I email, before the class session, and instruct my students to be able to access in

class all the readings, all their notes taken, and all the assignments graded thus far. In other words, bring all you stuff!

Step Two - Once we are gathered in class, I tell them to get out all of these materials and base any group participation upon our conversation since day one of our class. In other words, do not talk off the top of your head, focus upon what we have been discussing all semester.

Step Three - I divide the class into small groups. I inform the groups they have an hour to collaboratively write 10 basic concepts of the theory of liberative pedagogy. When the anxiety in the room spikes, I inform them that they are to use all the materials they brought to class. Sometimes the anxiety lowers and sometimes not.

Step Four - I say, "On your mark–GO!" I do not tell them it is a mid-term exam, but it is.

Step Five - While the groups are working to articulate their lists of basic concepts, my teaching assistant sets-up the computer so there is a blank page projected on the screen for all to see. The teaching assistant, during the report-in by the small groups, will record each of the concepts I approve to be written on our class list.

Step Six - After the hour, I reconvene the groups for our "round-robin report-in." Our aim is to take the lists from all the groups and create one list of basic concepts that we can ratify as a class. We refine the concepts during the group report-in through our conversation and through my editing.

A member from one of the small groups reads aloud one basic concept from the list they created when it is their turn. Groups will have multiple turns but will report-in only one concept at a time. If, when the one concept is shared aloud, the concept sounds reasonable and resonates with our collective understanding (and my listening ear), then the teaching assistant records the draft of the concept as read for all to see.

Once that concept is typed on the screen, I ask if any other group has a similar concept. If so, we use the other group's work to wordsmith the concept on the screen until it is clear and strong. If not, we wordsmith as a class.

Once a concept is refined to my satisfaction, we move to the next group to read aloud one basic concept from their list. We continue with the "round-robin report-in" until all the groups have exhausted all the concepts they recorded during their small group collaboration and until we have one common, sound list of basic concepts refined on the screen. This takes about an hour.

Step Seven - I provide a list of basic concepts from a previous course as a final way to strengthen our collective work. I invite the class to look through the list in order to add, reword, or strengthen the new list we have just drafted. There are always additions, edits, and re-wording to strengthen the list we have just created. Students like seeing the work of other classes as it lets them know the complexity of the task of articulation.

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Step Eight - I ask, referring to our list on the screen, “Does this list of basic concepts articulate the theory we are studying?” If yes, we celebrate our hard work. If no, we continue to work until we are satisfied with our articulation of basic concepts of emancipatory pedagogy.

Step Nine - I email our list of basic concepts to each student.

Of course, my students’ ability to excel at this exercise varies from class to class. Most fascinating is that, from year to year, no two lists of basic concepts have ever been the same while still capturing the crux of the theory. Every class has found their own way of articulating, from their own unique perspectives and experiences, the basic concepts. I am not looking for an essentialist or universal list of basic concepts. I am looking for their rendition.

We say a learner-centered education nurtures, kindles, and coaxes students into voice. With voice comes the responsibility of agency and service. Teaching toward voiced students is teaching the ability to speak articulately, eloquently, and intelligently about the issues of oppression, hegemony, violence and captivity–and not just passionately, without substance. Coming into voice is hindered by class sessions riddled with self-centered, pseudo-psychological moments of students filibustering through personal stories and anecdotes. Learner-centered teaching focuses upon the learner being able to articulate new ideas, new theories, new concepts, new vocabulary and hopefully, newly refined visions for a more just and equitable society.

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