



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Teaching with Compassion at a Time of Uncertainty and Upheaval

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We're in the middle of a pandemic with no clear end in sight. At the same time, many of us are taking a crash course in teaching online that we didn't sign up for, and we're handling it with varying degrees of success. Given all that, what should we focus on during the remaining weeks of our classes?

Start by taking your students into account. How are they doing? I'm at a small, Catholic college, and I'm teaching required, first-year general education classes this semester. My students were OK for the first two weeks of online classes, but they seem worn out now. They tell me that their professors were understanding at first, but then they returned to business as normal, creating a pileup of papers and exams just as the students were getting more tired and discouraged.

I didn't like hearing that.

For this semester, please, don't worry about covering content and let's lower our academic standards whenever it seems appropriate. Let's focus on what our students need.

So, what do our students need right now? Most important, they need our compassion and patience, and they need simple explanations of critical information. Even my stronger students are struggling to retain information because they are anxious, unfocused, and tired. Many of

them worry needlessly and endlessly. One girl has asked me five times whether I'll punish her for her intermittent Internet connectivity problems. I've reassured her repeatedly, but I suspect she's still worried. And all that worrying is making her even more tired and less able to learn.

I now spend the first few minutes of each class checking in, reassuring them, and reviewing basic information like course registration dates. With some trepidation, I promise that their other professors are reasonable people, and I coach them on how to talk to them. I use anonymous surveys to surface their concerns about their classes and the college. We discuss stress management and try to calm down. I've ordered all of them to take at least one full day off over Easter. I reassure, and explain again and again.

I've lowered my academic expectations. When my students struggle with understanding basic instructions, it's counterproductive to assign them long and difficult readings. So, I shorten the readings, and I use videos or pictures instead whenever possible. Comparing Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" to Harmonia Rosales' reinterpretation, which presents God as a black woman, allowed us to discuss many of the same issues as the feminist reading I had on my syllabus. And dropping the reading made my students just grateful enough to engage with the images when I asked.

I'm also revising the content of the last part of my course. As instructors in philosophy, theology, and religious studies, we are well positioned to have existential conversations with our students. After all, such questions are at the core of our disciplines! I'm focusing on questions at the intersection of my background and the current moment:

- Is happiness a choice, or do our circumstances determine whether we can be happy?
- What can we know and what should we do in the absence of certainty? Who do we trust?
- Why does God allow suffering?
- Does suffering make us better and stronger?
- How can religion be a source of strength? What about people who don't believe in God?

I'm inviting my students to draw on their experiences in their papers. They are crafting arguments about why God might allow the COVID-19 crisis and about how their experiences are making them stronger (or not). They are considering ways in which the burdens, yet again, fall disproportionately on some groups and asking how that might complicate the picture. They reflect upon how the crisis is affecting their own faith and on the possibility of staying happy and resilient in a crisis.

I'm drawing on texts I've already read and questions I've thought about before. I'm too tired right now to invent anything new! Your version will be different, focusing on your questions rather than mine, using texts you've read, movies you've seen, and art that has moved you. Experiment. Invite the students into a conversation that uses your discipline to help make sense of their experiences right now.

But don't drive yourself crazy. If nothing comes to mind, stick to a gentler version of your

original plan. Be kind to your students, but also to yourself.

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