WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Get to Know Students with Creative Bravery: One Size Does Not Fit All

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Have you ever asked a question in class for which you did not know the answer; a question for which you did not have THE one answer in mind? Have you ever planned an assignment or designed a learning activity that was so freewheeling that you did not know what was going to happen? What kind of teaching requires the teacher to be comfortable not knowing what will happen next or ever? I suspect it is teaching which is attentive to the personalities, dreams, capabilities, fears, and know-how, of each student in particular, and the entire class as a whole. Knowledge of each student allows for learning activities, group assignments, selected reading materials, and course aims which are sophisticated, risky, and precisely designed for the times at hand and the diverse contexts for which the students must be prepared to lead.

My hunch is that we too typically create assignments for which the answers and outcomes are forecastable because we have not taken the time to know who is in our classroom. We have specific ideas, standards, and quantifiers for the student to "get it right" with little understanding of the student's individual life experience or knowledge base. Students in turn, while navigating the current educational system are brilliant at analyzing each professor's wants, then giving that and only that. Professors' quirks are a text that is read, understood, and traversed as much or more as the content materials of our courses. Hallway gossip and

faculty reputations assure us that adult students are experts at studying the grading habits and personality types of teachers. In other words, teachers teach with strict disciplinary maps and scripts - a strict adherence to formulaic curriculum – a kind of one size fits all students. The questions and the answers are charted out and planned before gathering with students. Students strain as much to learn the formula of the prescribed script as they do to learn the content of the script. They ask, “Is this going to be on the test?” They say, silently or out loud, “Just tell me what you want me to tell you back?” Students learn the ways of gaming the system better than they learn the content of our courses.

What if our prescribed assignments are a detriment to our student’s ability to be effective in the workforce? What if scripted outcomes serve only to further domesticate learners? What if the lack of open-ended exploration champions mediocrity rather than excellence?

I suspect it will take creative bravery to reshape, rethink, reconceive our classrooms. And not just creative bravery in-general, but bravery which prioritizes learning our students, their uniquenesses and their potentials. The good news is that creative bravery is commonplace among artists and people who understand creativity as a way of life. The challenging news is that this kind of bravery is suspect and punished in the current educational system.

A clip that went viral on social media depicted the ritual of an elementary school teacher meeting his students each morning at the doorway of their classroom. The daily ritual was to shake hands with each student each morning. Each student had a unique handshake for greeting the teacher and the teacher knew the unique handshake for each student. Some of the handshakes were simple – one or two gestures. Other handshakes were complex – looking more like a dance between student and teacher than a traditional handshake. It was clear to me that this kind of welcoming communicated to each student that he/she/they were seen and known by the teacher. This was a powerful expression of a teacher who understood the necessity of each student feeling their distinctiveness, being in relationship with the teacher, and knowing they were seen. When students feel seen, known, and welcomed in classrooms, learning improves, deepens, and becomes more meaningful.

The myth of teaching for one-size-fits-all is possibly the worse practice of our teaching craft.

We must grapple with finding ways to identify and honor that which each student brings into the classroom because each brings uniqueness. In a jazz band, no one expects all the musicians to play the same instrument – that would be ridiculous. No one criticizes the drummer for drumming or the saxophone player for playing the sax. Each musician is expected, required even, to bring what they have in the way that they have it; in their own voice. Each instrument is required to make the sound of that instrument. Consider then, that each student should be expected to bring their unique voice and particular understanding to the collective composition of the classroom and that the teacher must welcome all the different kinds of voices. Creativity requires diversity. The band leader’s job is not to strip the musician of their uniqueness or their sound, but to blend, sculpt, highlight, spotlight and listen. The leader’s job is to know the many voices and create ways of showcasing each potential contribution.

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One of my ongoing frustrations while I was on a teaching faculty was that by the end of my introductory course I felt as if, now, I knew my students well enough to teach them, but our time was up. It took time, a semester or longer, to learn to hear them, to be able to sense their concerns, learn their sensitivities and sensibilities, and to relate my expectations for their learning. By the last day of class, I knew their patterns, their vocabulary, their senses of humor and how to alleviate some of their fears. By the last day of class, it felt as if I could NOW shake their hands or ask them truly open-ended questions or give them innovative learning assignments for which I had crafted with each one in mind. Forming relationships with our students takes time that is so often not built into our typical models of education.

There is an intimacy that occurs between learner and professor that only happens in the relationship of teaching. It is a profound experience to be seen by a respected teacher and told that, as a learner, you have what it takes. These relationships are potentially life giving and life changing. These relationships are not formed when classrooms operate on a factory mentality where student needs are relatively inconsequential to the teaching. The intimacy shared between teacher and learner makes vivid the humanity of each. Classrooms are spaces where the vulnerability and openness of the adult learner can be met with hope, empowerment, reinvigoration of curiosity, and healing imagination.

This pedagogical intimacy was made vivid to me the first time I read a letter of recommendation written for me by my graduate school professor, advisor and mentor. The letter described many of the attributes and capabilities I knew I possessed. It also discussed his vision for my potential, my promise, my likely successes as a scholar and religious leader. Much of the budding possibility that he described - I was unaware of. And, until reading his letter, I was unaware that he had seen me so well. My mentor, for the three years of study, had paid attention to me in our courses and as I worked as a research assistant. This letter humbled me and set an expectation for which I have been striving.

In contrast, as a reader of applications for jobs, grants, or other high-level projects, I have read letters of recommendation which demonstrate the writer has no passion or knowledge of the applicant. The letter is perfunctory – a kind of mechanical formula which might fit any person who sat through a course and for which, now, there is an obligation for recommendation based upon an exemplary grade. I have actually read the same prose in a letter submitted by one recommender for two different people (oopsie!). It is clear that the writer of the letter did get to know the student and cannot earnestly recommend the applicant. Many awards have been denied based upon the weakness of a flimsy recommendation by a person who wrote a one-size-fits-all recommendation. If we do not get to know our students, we cannot recommend them for anything.

Teaching at a distance during quarantine has strained and taxed our teaching communities in ways we have not yet fully lived. I suspect we have lost intimacy with our students. The physical separation of teaching synchronously or asynchronously coupled with the lack of casual interaction in the hallways, cafeterias, and school assemblies has frayed our relationships and weakened our educational communities. The content of our courses is

paramount, but without deep relationships with our students, teaching rings like a hollow bell. There is something intangible and irreplaceable about being face-to-face with students as they learn and grow.

What would be needed to get to know students who are enrolled in your course before planning the course? What exercises might you plan for the first weeks of a course which would enable you to see, feel, and hear the potentials of our students so that lesson planning might be more precise? What learning activities can be tailored to the uniquenesses of each student? What would it mean to plan a syllabus which can be refined as students become more vivid to you throughout the semester? What kinds of community activities will need to be designed for those who entered degree programs during the quarantine resulting in only being known through online mediums? If you are teaching huge classes, what strategies will enable you to get to know students?

The risk of getting to know our students is, I suspect, well worth it.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/06/get-to-know-students-with-creative-bravery-one-size-does-not-fit-all/

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