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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Assigned Readings as Larger Communities - Knowing, Doing, and Desire

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

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When I was doing my PhD, I remember being anxious about the readings to be done. Union professors used to assign hundreds of pages to read every week. I am a slow reader and I would always come to class with my readings incomplete. That generated an enormous anxiety that made me fear classes rather than enjoy them. I kept myself very quiet, trying to hide from my teacher as much as possible. Other students, who didn't do the readings either, would open the text on page seventy-six, read it, and make a comment. These comments were clearly made up on the fly but at least these students participated. I was notably quiet. Only when I was able to read the texts would I speak. I remember a class for which we had to read one novel per week. My goodness, I couldn't even get close to finishing the novels. I remember the amount of anxiety during that semester. I didn't know about Cliffs notes and we didn't have YouTube or Google. One day, when we were discussing a novel in small groups, I mentioned that I had not finished the novel and couldn't participate. The TA was present in that group. Sure enough, my final evaluation came with the statement that I didn't read the novels. I was devastated.

When I became a professor, this is what I knew how to do: give many readings to my students. It was the way I had been taught. I was shocked when I was at Louisville seminary and Professor Amy P. Pauw told me: one hundred pages is enough. I was shocked. In my first years of teaching I thought it was very poor educating! For me, the amount of reading was proportionally related to the success of the class. But not only that. I realized that my anxiety transferred to the students. Would they read? I never did quizzes, I abhor quizzes, mostly

because they were traumatic in my early learning years. Every quiz was a test of my inability, an entrance into my real fake world, a door that would show how stupid I was. Every quiz/grade was a litmus test of who I was and what my future would be.

And in that cloud of anxiety, I had to make sure students read all the assignments. I would question some students if I felt they had not finished a reading. I developed ways of knowing when students didn't read. I could never penalize them, but knowing that students would have not read made me anxious and angry all semester long. It took me a while to understand that my anxiety was not about my students but about my own self, knowing I didn't do the readings when I was a student. Embarrassing.

Fast forward to now; I am just now learning to assign less readings. I know it doesn't make sense, but it gives me some sense of security. However, I have learned to do things differently. Now I tell my students: There is a lot of reading, but you read what you want, what you can, or what interests you. All the readings have to do with the issue at stake but differ in how they approach it. I have also added movies and art as different resources. Some classes are more successful than others. But what is most important now is that I tell my students they don't need to read the texts. I stress how important it is to read and that without the texts the class will be boring and less engaging, but that I understand how life is and how difficult it is to make it all work. It is not only that texts will create a great class, but a good class will entice students to read the texts.

If therapy has helped me see how much I cast a net of my own projections, fears, and insecurities over my students, teaching has helped me see that I need to constantly change. My forms of knowing and doing change, so my classes change too.

However, these changes are necessary not only because of what happens to me but because of the ways societies shift and how methods of educating are becoming obsolete. The transmission of information is no longer critical. Information is everywhere now and easily accessed under our scrolling fingers. We have way too much information. Thus, our classes have to be different. If a class is the same passing of information and content as the scrolling of news, it doesn't really matter if the class is online or in person, if the class lasts three hours or fifty minutes. The time and medium are different, but the transmission is the same.

What makes education unique is this fantastic time/space together when something happens that cannot be gained elsewhere. A time not to create results but to be transformed. To learn and educate each other is to venture into other pedagogical forms that will engage learning differently. We go from passing information to being fully there and bless each other. We then engage knowledge as something to know and to savor, to heal and to transform. We carry something else in our heart and if we can somewhat remember these times is because our bodies loved it. To know comes from a precious moment when we learn together, in a territory, a shared place; living in an eco-system, with other beings. To know as to rediscover the learnings we already carry within us, and recover ancestral forms of knowledges. And classrooms become a place where knowledge is both in me and in you, but most fundamentally,

between us. THAT is the place of education!

Tiño Rocha, an educator from Brazil says that there is a difference between the teacher and the educator. The teacher is the one who teaches, and the educator is the one who learns. Then, how can we all, professors and students, become teachers and educators?

Tiño Rocha says that the educator needs to know three things about their students: how each person engages their forms of knowing, their doings, and their desires.[1] Students already hold many forms of knowledge. What are they? How did and do they go about knowing the things they know? Students already do things and engage life practically. What are they doing and how do they do it? Students already have many forms of desire in them and they go about life desiring and living life from these desires. What are these desires? What are the desires to unlearn, what are the desires to learn?

Education only happens when we learn about each other's knowings, doings, and desires. That means that we learn the theoretical/practical ways of living so we can give contours to life, can change our realities. That also means that the format of classrooms should change. Our syllabus should be an unfinished map. Teachers must offer different forms of learning, different configurations of classrooms, different forms of engaging texts, different ways where bodies can actually think, different strategies to do assignments. That is when art can help us by expanding the venues of learning and doing. I offer my students creative forms of engagement with the class. A student once offered a dance as a final project and wrote about it, and it was fascinating. Final papers done together. Half of my class is discussion. The other half is practice.

As we think/do/desire this craft we do, we can't forget that the vortex of energy behind us is capitalism and the key and center of anything is the production of stuff. We have to produce good classes with good results and the students must produce good results to feel that they have accomplished something. We end up striving more for the diploma than for the journey. We are all hooked up into this modulation of learning. And it is hard to change. When we go to AAR or other guilds for instance, the pedagogy is the same: three to five people sitting at a table in the front talking for three hours to an audience who stays seated until they can say a thing or two. After a whole day going from one seating to another we are exhausted. Nonetheless, we *produced* a good day of learning! To change this would be to fall into wishy-washy stuff. And yes, I understand, there is a lot of that around.

But I wonder how we move from the producing of things for the sake of results to a form of knowing that creates community where being together, telling stories, and sharing about the struggles of our lives is more important than the outcomes.

My quest is to discover how texts and ways of teaching and learning can help turn our experiences into learning together that orients the practices of our lives. Not experiences that take us into forms of autonomy but rather, into what Derrida once called "heteronomy without servitude." I wonder how we can find a way together in class when our stories are woven into a form of a certain common tapestry, when what we speak about ourselves is not as narcissists

but as collective knowers, implicated into each other's lives. If education is about desire as Tião Rocha said, then this is something we can strive to do:

Passion above all creates a dependent freedom, determined, bound, obligated, included, founded not in itself but in a first acceptance of something that is outside of me, of something that is not me and that that, precisely, is capable of falling in love.[2]

That is the place where we are grounded, in that classroom, in that neighborhood, in that environment, with many forms of living. That is the place of coexistence and dependent freedom. That place is the "in between" place as we teach and learn together with all of our knowing, doing, and desires. Assigned readings then, are invitations to join much larger communities, made of those who we might know a bit but also, made of those we have no idea or have nothing in common. They are just that: invitations! With these invitations (intrusions) we build a class, a village! Perhaps that is what we might call a good class: a village! Or as Brazilian thinker Alana Moraes says:

A good class invites us to think together, including what the best texts can be to accompany us on this journey. Obviously, professors play an important role in this choice, but there needs to be space to think with students about the best paths for a unique collectivity. It is more difficult, it requires more openness, but it is no longer possible to defend democracy in the abstract if we are not able to radicalize our everyday ways of teaching and doing research in any way.[3]

[1] *A Arte De Educar Com Tião Rocha*, <https://www.cpcd.org.br/portfolio/a-arte-de-educar-com-tiao-rocha/>

[2] Jorge Larrosa Bondía, "Notas Sobre A Experiência E O Saber De Experiência," *Revista Brasileira de Educação*, Rio de Janeiro, Jan/Fev/Mar/Abr 2002 Nº 19, 19-28.

[3] Alana Moraes, Twitter, August 26, 2022, https://twitter.com/alanamoraes_x

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