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Curation in Teaching

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I've been doing some nonfiction creative writing recently (you can see my latest piece here, if you'd like). And it's been an interesting exercise in curation, a term most closely associated with the world of art history, but now used all over the place. When writing about a real life, you have so many precious details, nuances, characters, memories—and you have to carefully select, and then organize, which of those are most important, which will then be preserved in the (perhaps someday published) story you aim to tell.

Of course, we curate all the time, not just in art galleries or storytelling. What do we take care of? What do we retain or prioritize or foreground? What do we exclude? What are we missing? When someone asks us how we are doing, so often we simply default to saying, "Great, and you?" regardless of whether this is actually how we feel. We curate what news we consume, what friends we spend time with, what food we put in our bodies. We curate in partnerships and parenting. We curate at work. And we curate in our teaching.

Think about which parts of yourself you disclose to your students. Think about what activities and assignments you make space for on the schedule and which you don't. Think about what concepts or skills you think the students can handle, or need, to learn at any given moment in a course, and which will have to be saved for another time. This is all a form of curation, I would argue.

I often say that a syllabus is more about what doesn't make it in than what does. Especially in introductory religion courses—we have to leave out so much! (And, of course, with the material that *does* make the cut, like a curator at a museum, we have to think how to structure that material into the "narrative arc" of a course—a concept I, as a writer, love.) We only have so much time and energy. We can't do it all, folks.

There are all sorts of criteria for curation in the classroom—our areas of expertise, our personal interests, the course's learning objectives, the level of the students, the institutional mission—but those aren't my focus here. What I want to muse on is the dark side of curation, which I think social media aptly represents. (This is one of the main reasons I stopped using social media over a decade ago.) Curated content can give a false, and unattainable, impression of perfection. (How often do we feel badly about our own lives when we see the seemingly flawless lives depicted on others' Facebook or Instagram accounts?) Curation can elide or obscure process. (How many photos did it actually take to capture that one where the whole family was smiling?) Curation can seem to emphasize singularity or definitiveness, over nuance, messiness, options, multiplicity. Curation can make matters appear finished or settled or completed. Curation can feel closed.

I imagine these impressions can have some negative effects on students. Perhaps, when we cut out debate or history or context—that is, the messiness, the details—students are left with problematic notions about the study of religion (e.g., that there is a singular definition of the term) or specific religions (e.g., that Hinduism is all about karma and dharma). Perhaps students wind up not understanding the extensive, nonlinear, trial-and-error process that's required to acquire important knowledge or skills in our field. Perhaps they feel ashamed if they don't understand the reading for the week or if they bomb the only test. Perhaps they look at the example essay and think, "*Maybe this whole college thing isn't for me*."

Curation is necessary, common, and often beautiful—but it can carry some risks. How might we dodge these downsides in our teaching? Here are some strategies I've tried, to pull back the curtain a bit for students, while accepting that I must inevitably curate the learning environment and experience to some extent. For starters, I sometimes talk about how I went about creating the syllabus and how (and why) I decided what to include and what to leave off. Or I mention what I've done in past courses and why I've changed my approach. I point out mistakes or typos in the printed works we read. I show students drafts of my own articles and (often quite critical) peer-review comments, as I've mentioned in this blog before. When I want to provide a model for a particular assignment, I try to give multiple examples (rather than one, which they may then feel pressured to simply emulate) and/or annotate the example(s) with both strengths as well as areas of improvement. I assign authors or speakers with different, sometimes totally oppositional, viewpoints, so students understand that there isn't a single correct view to hold on any given topic. I provide examples of the differences between the aspirational, ideal, "authoritative," or textbook version of a religion and the various ways that real people are going about, living their lives, around the globe and at different times. If we don't have time to get into the depth or nuance of a particular topic, I still make a point to underscore, repeatedly, the complexity. I admit to some of my own struggles with the readings

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or tough topics. I tell them about my own undergrad experiences. I say when I don't know. We talk about what's happening around campus, in town, or around the world, and how appearances can differ from reality.

How do you experience the concept of curation in your own teaching? And what are some ways you can retain the benefits and beauty of curation, while also avoiding its pitfalls?

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/12/curation-in-teaching/

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