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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Activist Education

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I am an activist educator. What this means is that I strive for justice both in and outside the classroom. I utilize critical or liberatory pedagogies as my theoretical bases. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire said, liberatory pedagogy involves linking the word with the world. In my thirty-three years of teaching at Agnes Scott College, I have brought the things I care about, both people and policy, into my teaching. In my classes students connect with the community, both on and off campus, through practicums with local organizations and guest speakers and walking tours of the city. I work hard not to “indoctrinate” students—as if that were even possible—and to create bold spaces with my students to engage complex social and political issues. Democratic education is not “sit and git,” a phrase I recently heard an abolitionist teacher repeat to describe his resistance methods in his high school classes. It is embodied, hands-on, messy, moving, imperfect, risky, playful, and shared.

The day before classes began this semester, my college announced they were extending the contract with Aramark over food service staff to the entire campus, from not previously outsourced (Facilities) to already outsourced (HVAC, electrical, and landscaping). The announcement was planned to be for Facilities only, but student leaders in our living wage campaign and some key faculty leaders organized a protest by showing up at that meeting. There is a quote from the Aramark head guy that summarizes the neoliberal take over: “Higher education needs to transform itself and get more like business and industry and understand how they can lower costs and improve service levels.” This quote exposes what James Lawson labelled “plantation capitalism” (also known as “plantation politics”), the extension of the legacy of slavery into our current economic labor relationships. My facilities colleagues are

reacting with phrases such as: “We’ve been sold.” Many of us students, alumnae, faculty, and staff feel we are experiencing the caving in of whatever moral center our institution had. We are protesting as I type this blog.

I have been outspoken in this movement for three decades, so students know I have firm opinions about economic justice on our campus. How do I create a bold space in the classroom for differing opinions? A favorite educator of mine, historian Howard Zinn, put in his course syllabi the following statement:

- This is not an “objective” course. I will not lie to you, or conceal information from you because it is embarrassing to my beliefs. But I am not a “neutral” teacher. I have a point of view about war, about racial and sexual inequality, about economic injustice—and this point of view will affect my choice of subject, and the way I discuss it. I ask you to listen to my point of view, but I don’t expect you to adopt it. You have a right to argue with me about anything, because, on the truly important issues of human life there are no “experts.” I will express myself strongly, as honestly as I can, and I expect you to do the same. I am not your only source of information, of ideas. Points of view different from mine are all around, in the library, in the press. Read as much as you can. All I ask is that you examine my information, my ideas and make up your own mind. (*Failure to Quit: Reflections of an Optimistic Historian*. New York: South End Press, 2002, p. 29)

Whether acknowledged or not, all pedagogy is a pedagogy of place; the place of our classroom and campus, in concentric circles out, and back. This fall I began my third semester teaching a first-year required Leadership 101 course. My topic is “Religion and Economic Justice.” The beginning point is an “economic autoethnography,” a way for students to tap into their own intersectional social locations to understand economic (in)justices. The class of seventeen students is diverse, with a majority of students of color, with former refugees, international students, first generation students, along with several from single-parent, low income families. Some examples of writing prompts from this autoethnography assignment include:

- What is your understanding of social class from your own background? Tell a story.
- What is your own labor history? Your parents? Your grandparents?
- What institutional manifestations of classism have you seen and/or experienced? (e.g. health care, employment, education, etc.)
- In what ways has your social location and identity and also experience of social class and labor influenced your definition of “leadership”?
- What role has religion had (directly or indirectly) in your understanding of social class, classism, economic justice, and leadership?

In this course students learn about our campus living wage campaign, work with a homeless shelter across the street from the college, engage leaders in local economic justice movements (the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, the Georgia Poor Peoples Campaign, and the film director of the new documentary *No Address: Part 2: On the Criminalization of the Homeless in Atlanta*) and national movements (in particular the Poor People’s Campaign: The

Call for a Moral Revival). From their own personal stories, students dive into leadership stories—from student leaders in the living wage campaign, to more well-known leaders from the past or present (e.g. James Lawson, Bishop William Barber, Rev. Liz Theoharis, Grace Lee Boggs, M.L. King, Jr., Marian Wright Edelman, Hosea Williams, Dolores Huerta, Bayard Rustin, and others) as a framework for reflecting on their encounters during the semester.

As we engage the real time and real world happenings of economic injustice and movements to build a better world in the here and now and for those who come after us, I want my students to wrestle, as I do, with really complex issues for which I do not have “the answer” or solution.

And I invite them, in the words of Myles Horton of the Highlander Research Center, “to make the road by walking” for “the long haul.”

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/10/activist-education/>