



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## FAQ: Introductory Courses

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse  
March 01, 2023

A common aspect of websites is “Frequently Asked Questions.” This is a handy feature. It is meant to assist the inquiring person with succinct information. It is meant to answer questions searchers did not know they have or provide answers to questions for which they have specific interest. It is also a way for the business to be able to articulate, in a concise way, their benefits, capacities, and capabilities. The key to FAQ is that they are not the questions of the business, but they are the questions of the client to the business. The value is that the business has answers to these distinct and important questions.

I do not want to push this metaphor too far.

I do not think our students are our clients, customers, nor benefactors.

At the same time, I do think that it is important for us, in introductory course preparation, to take-on an empathic perspective for our students. We must consider, from their perspective, that they are learning new language, new concepts – never before exposed to - ideas. We must anticipate a version of their FAQ.

Teachers must take time to think-through, reflect upon, and design succinct articulation of the benefits, functions, and qualities so that introductory courses are not perfunctory, stale, or unintelligible. Learners should not have to wait until the completion of the degree before they

are able to understand and meaningfully interpret the introductory syllabus.

Below, is a list of reflection questions with learner's FAQ in mind. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of their questions. This list is meant to spark conversation so colleagues, in context, can discuss, compare-and-contrast, and consider what is better/best for their own introductory courses and the students who trust us with their learning.

### **One: What is the intention of this introductory course?**

This might be the most difficult of all their questions. If you cannot say the thesis of the course WITHOUT jargony words or technical language or theoretical phrases for which the students have yet to be exposed or taught, then the course is not yet ready to be taught.

For your introductory course, what is the punch line, thesis statement, refrain, big idea? Please write in language that can be understood before the study of the course material.

From the student's perspective, what am I about to be graded about?

### **Two: What is the approach of the course?**

The information age is eroding the notion of one supremacist perspective for teaching the big questions of life and scholarship. Unmistakably, there are major shifts in the academy for including multiple voices and many worldviews, even starting with introductory courses. Ideas in introductory courses are no longer "obvious" or "natural" or "to be expected under the circumstances" - a kind of "of course" attitude or "everyone knows" posture as if there is no need for deliberation or new planning or thinking anew.

The question of scholarly approach is in story. In the course, whose story are the learners being asked to enter into? And if not their own story - then why not? What cultural assumptions and presuppositions are operative in the framing of the introductory course? To what are you asking me (the learner) to open my mind and how will this benefit the people who have sacrificed for me to be a student?

What student skills, practices and habits will I need to be successful? What new skills will you expose me to for my learning?

The more racial, cultural, ethnic, and age diversity of your learners, the more complex the response must become. Remember that complexity does not have to lead to convolution.

### **Three: Why does this course matter?**

The question of relevance is a critical question to learners. The question is sometimes pragmatic and sometimes political - always on their minds.

What do you expect students to become or do as a result of the course?

How much time will it likely take before students learn, change, grow in this material - weeks, months, years?

The question of relevance will shift with the demographics of your students. The more diverse your students, the more complex the response to this question must become. There can be, if we grapple well, elegance in complexity.

The question of relevance is directly related to teaching anecdotes to mis-education. This will be particularly vital for majority culture students.

#### **Four: What is the vocabulary of the course?**

In the first session of my introductory courses, I got in the habit of initiating a conversation about vocabulary. As part of rehearsing the syllabus, I would tell my students that during the semester I would teach them words that, at first, would feel awkward in their mouths. I told them we would be using a language and jargon that would not work at church potlucks or cocktail parties. But I told them, as learned people, we have a vocabulary for which they must become proficient, even fluent.

The presence of students who speak many languages learning along-side students who speak only one language makes this question more complex.

#### **Five: How? How will students learn? How will students pass this course?**

What will I be asked to do to learn?

What will be the task of my body while learning? Am I just to sit and listen as you talk?

What student skills, practices and habits will I need to be successful?

What new skills, practices and habits will you teach me to engage my learning in this course?

What will there be to: see, smell, taste, hear, feel - to intuit?

Will there be field trips, excursions, people to meet, new places and encounters where I welcome the stranger and make them my friend? Will I have opportunity to be as a stranger in hopes of being welcomed?

The educational formation which brought students to college, graduate school and seminary will have shaped, formed or deformed learners. Awareness and attention to student's previous experiences of coursework is critical to answering this question. If there are a diversity of students, e.g. international students and minoritized students, this question becomes much more complex.

**Six: Teacher - who are you?**

We know that many minoritized students learn better when they relate well to the teacher. For them/us, learning is communal and relational. For many majority culture students, the attitude, opinions, and affirmations of teachers is less important and plays a lesser role in their achievement.

For BIPOC faculty, all students will likely wonder or question the credentials, institutional value, and authority of those instructors. The identity politics in classrooms is often dangerous for BIPOC faculty, so knowing what and what not to disclose is complicated.

We know from Parker Palmer, noted teacher and author, that we teach who we are.

**Seven: Who is the learner?**

What does it take to design an introductory course before meeting the students on the first day of class?

What can be known about the enrolled students for better course planning?

What are the fears of the learners? By what course design and strategy will you quiet their fears early on course?

The more diverse the student body, the more difficult and complicated an answer to this question will be.

Who in your institution is tasked with providing a profile of each incoming class and a summary report of each enrolled student's previous experiences and exposures to learning?

**Eight: How is the teacher's passion taught in the introduction course? If not - why not?**

I have heard senior scholars say that they do NOT teach what interests them until they teach upper-level seminars because they believe introductory courses are not meant to reflect one's

own research interests, passions, or professional curiosities. From my perspective, this is wrong-headed and explains, a bit, why some introductory courses are so dull and insipid. How will your passions, unique knowledges, and scholarly knowhow be the cornerstone of your introductory course?

Answering these questions does not create a syllabus. And I am not suggesting you add a section to your syllabus for “frequently asked questions.” These questions, as a combination, assortment, and hodgepodge, are meant to encourage your planning, preparation, and thoughtfulness to create empathy with and compassion for adult learners who dare to enter into classrooms of religion and theology. Our students, from the very beginning, deserve teachers who are ready and know how to invite them to learn. Learners want courses that are shared endeavors and not just the presence of a subject expert who has not considered the broader experience of their learning.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2023/03/faq-introductory-courses/>