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Being Triggered as a Professor

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Being Triggered as a Professor

I have noticed that some students are quick to throw loaded terms without knowing exactly what they mean, or they erroneously assume they know what they mean. Maybe you can relate. For example, I was teaching a Contemporary Theologies course and I was discussing German theologians during and post-World War II. One of my students did not know the difference between fascism and communism. This student basically stated that the Nazis were socialists and by extension communists because their name was the National *Socialist* German Workers' Party (*National-Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*). The student could not get past the "Socialist" in the name and described anything left-leaning as fascist. As you and I know, the fascists and the communists could not stand one another. The only thing they had in common was the totalitarian form of government with strong dictatorships in power. However, their foundation and aim were different. I pointed the student to basic Encyclopedia Britannica articles on the political spectrum, fascism and on Nazism so that this student could better understand the difference between the two.

I was taken back by the student's confidence in his position and his willingness to correct me when he was so sure I had made a mistake. In the end I was surprised by having to endure a student like this who did not want to listen. In this case, this particular student came to the classroom with a mind already made up and not willing to dialogue with different or diverging

ideas, or even those based on facts. Rather, this student was there wanting to reinforce preconceived notions of what is right and wrong, and in this case, what was left and what was right.

I had another student in a different semester's offering of the same course that really set me off—I lost it. This student refused to acknowledge racism and the effects of racism in US society. I had students of color who were emailing me of how deeply offended they were from the first day of class until the last day of class. This particular student firmly believed that the US was completely free of any type of racism. Consequently, Black people were lazy, Hispanics/Latin@s liked to blame Caucasian people like him for all their problems. The student refused to acknowledge history, of things that happened in the Civil Rights Era, and problems that continue to affect minorities and people of color.

I don't know if you've ever been there, but I lost my patience with this student on the second day of class. Oh, my! It was going to be a long semester. I could feel my blood pressure rising. My muscles began to tighten. My heartbeat went up a few notches. It seldom happens, but at that moment I began to ask this student a barrage of questions and making statements about being intolerant and closed-minded to considering the perspectives of others and those from different communities who have suffered under unjust housing practices, and deeply ingrained attitudes and postures from those in power in society.^[1] I wanted to say (but thankfully I did not), *what in the world are you doing in graduate school if you don't want to learn anything? What are you doing in graduate school if you already have the answers to life's great questions?*

It is not a good place to be, being triggered and going off on a student. It sets a poor example. We are to model hard intellectual reasoning. Also, as a teacher, my vocation is to model a hospitable classroom environment—even with those that do not agree with me. Nothing gets accomplished in the heat of the moment with tense exchanges or when we get angry.

As I was wrestling with this student and his lack of engagement, and taking into consideration our students of color in the class, I finally realized that I was not going to change this person. All I could do at this point was not react in the way that this student expected. The student was actually getting pleasure from being the unmovable object in the class. It was reinforcing his victim mentality and it was reinforcing his own belief that he was blessed as he was persecuted.

Education is not going into a classroom to reinforce one's own ideas or point of view. Part of the value of education is observation and the ability to take on multiple perspectives, having the common decency to put oneself in another person's shoes and having empathy. Education involves some level of contemplation upon the world and my neighbor. It is a continual question included in the Gospels, "who is my neighbor?" in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). One cannot help but realize that no matter the ethnic, cultural, or racial origins of my neighbor, that we are interconnected. Humans are spiritual beings and that compassion is one of the core values that we must demonstrate towards one another. There

must be empathy, kindness, and humility towards the other. It is on this road that we can establish some kind of spiritual enlightenment about living in an increasingly diverse society. Either we enter with fear defending our way of life to the very end, or we enter with a holy reverence towards the other as a fellow human being in the *imago Dei*.

In the end I also had to examine myself. I had a long day. The class was at night, I was tired. The other issue I had was that I had to try to defuse the situation. I had to model my sense of tolerance even for those who have different perspectives from my own. It is not the first time that this has happened nor will it be the last. Finally, I decided to trust the institution and my colleagues, knowing that through the whole process at any serious graduate-level institution, the student will continually be challenged to have a rational, modern, and well-informed outlook. We are seeking to form individuals who are deeply, spiritually aware of their vertical-horizontal relationships—to God, to others, and the self. In the meantime, I prayerfully continue to teach, knowing that transformation is ultimately not left up to me. So, I tried hard to let the conversations continue to be frank and honest and to let history and hard rational discussion tell the story, ultimately trying to model a positive affective disposition towards the other.

Notes & Bibliography

^[1] See for example, Robbie W.C. Tourse, Johnnie Hamilton-Mason, Nancy J. Wewiorski, *Systemic Racism in the United States: Scaffolding as Social Construction* (Cham, Switzerland: 2018).

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/12/being-triggered-as-a-professor/>