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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Back to School Jitters

Kate Blanchard, *Alma College*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

September 09, 2014

Tags: teaching moments | vocation of teaching | assessing teaching

It's late summer in North America. The days are breezy, the nights are cool. Students in athletics t-shirts and shower shoes shuffle around campus. Here in Alma the intermittent sounds of marching bands, coaches' whistles, and bagpipes hover over the lawns. And best of all, the air has that "back to school" scent (that is, when it doesn't smell like wafting cow manure).

Like many of you, I enjoy the nostalgia and excitement of that back to school feeling. But as a teacher I also find it stressful. It's not just the preparation, which has gotten a bit easier every year. What continues to be difficult are the anxieties that the new school year brings with it, the biggest of which is standing alone in front of 25 stone-faced adolescents (times two or three) whom I've never met. I wish I could say that I was worried about not being smart enough to teach them, or not having included enough pedagogically-innovative activities and assignments to get their best work out of them, but these are the kinds of fears that experience has largely put to rest. I have discovered that students generally learn because they are motivated to do so, and there's precious little I can do to motivate them. Almost regardless of my planning, some students will learn a great deal while others will leave the class with no immediately observable benefit to themselves or the world - though I do hope there are seeds

that might sprout later.

No, what worries me most are embarrassingly stupid concerns that are not unlike fears I had as a new kid in a new school back in the 6th grade: *Will they like me? Will they think I'm boring? And How fat does my butt look?* A slightly more grown-up version of these questions might be, *What will they say about me on Rate My Professor?* I am quick to assure readers that these fears do not make me proud of myself, especially because I aspire to embody feminist and liberationist virtues, among which likeability and svelteness are way down at the bottom of the list. (I dare say my anxieties are learned and highly gendered cultural behaviors, though there may be some men out there who can relate.)

It is troubling to feel so very human even in my mid-40s. When I was a college student, it never occurred to me that my professors cared whether I liked them or not. They were professors! They had made it! They held my future in their nerdy, wrinkled hands! Surely their inner dialogue would rise far above the level of Bridget Jones' sad little diary. But if I thought all my immaturity would magically disappear with the achievement of a Ph.D. or tenure, I was sorely mistaken. All that has changed is that I now know how to analyze these banal fears critically, which, let's be honest, provides no real relief at all.



So this back to school season, until I learn my students' names and begin to feel that we know each other a bit, I will be practicing the not-so-simple art of self-acceptance. I will simply notice, with a breath and as little judgment as possible, that all these years and degrees later I'm still only a person who wants to feel that she brings something important to the world. The upside of this is a sense of solidarity: my anxiety probably makes me more like my students than they could ever know.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2014/09/back-to-school-jitters/>