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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



How I Learned to Leave My Lecture Notes Behind ... Sometimes

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It was the middle of the semester, a time when exhaustion so often overtakes pedagogical finesse, a time when the energy of new courses is abating and the promise of a reprieve from grading and lecturing is too distant to relish. It was during one of these mornings when I lamented to my colleague that I felt insufficiently prepared to lecture in my course. She shared with me an insight that has shifted how I prepare for my classes.

In the first few years of teaching, balance on the pre-tenure track is fleeting. This lack of balance is exemplified by the frantic pace and workload that creating new syllabi and assignments, writing new course material, and assessing both on the fly brings upon new faculty. How do we prioritize our time and our efforts? Given that the length of our days is unchanging,¹¹ how do we invest in students in a smart way? Given that we can only do so much, how do we teach efficiently?

All of these questions take us back to my colleague's sage advice. She asked me a simple question.

If I have to write something down in order to remember it, why would I expect my students to integrate it into their knowledge and experience? If I have to write something down in order to remember to teach it to my students, how important is it really?

That is, what are the most important matters we want our students to learn? Aren't they those

insights and experiences that we have cultivated over years of committed study, extended reflection, and formative experiences? That's the kind of stuff we don't commit to paper but to memory. We commit them to memory not by rote but by letting it shape us at our very core, which is precisely what has driven a life of study and teaching.

Teaching, especially in our earliest experiences, can quite easily expose our anxieties and insecurities. Standing in front of a classroom full of students, I have clutched my carefully crafted lectures, well-outlined notes, or even an intricate visual presentation as a means of protection and safety. What if we instead held on tightly to that which we know best, to those passions that have carried us thus far?

I followed my colleague's advice and started trusting a bit more my education, training, and passion. Of course, this does not mean that I started winging my lectures and teaching. Neither does it mean that the pressures of teaching simply disappeared. I prepare. I study. I review. I take notes and even write manuscripts of portions or the entirety of my lectures. But I also have found a great deal of freedom in leaning on my preparation in graduate school and simply teaching those things I am most passionate about.

Try this experiment. If you had to teach on your field of study five minutes from now without the help of notes, what would you say? Our daily teaching is not such a dire scenario but perhaps such a scenario is nonetheless instructive,^[2] for it would reveal most clearly what is at the center of our pedagogical commitments.

Looking back on my first few years of teaching, I wish I had given myself the freedom to be less explicit in some aspects of my teaching. I spent too much time grading with a fine tooth comb and honing my lecture notes. I could instead have provided helpful but broader comments on papers. I could have leaned on my knowledge and learning to help fill out my lecture notes. Such freedom would have given me room to reflect on where more explicit direction would have been useful to my students.

(I would have liked to have been far more explicit with students about my expectations and my assignments. The vast majority of my students are responsible and self-directed but a handful of students too often exploit the ambiguities of a new professor's syllabus or my inexperience...but I digress!)

But more than all that, I wish I had given myself the freedom to be a teacher, not an anxious graduate student still trying to make the grade. This transition is by no means easy but essential to our vocations as educators.

^[1] By the way, if you lament that we can't extend our days beyond 24 hours, read *The Age of Miracles* by Karen Thompson Walker (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0812982940>). That will cure you of such hopes!

^[2] Of course, this works very well when we are teaching at the center of our disciplines. This is not always the case as some courses will stretch us beyond our particular guilds and into new realms of knowledge. Even then, we bring an indispensable expertise to the table. Lean on it, even as you necessarily lean more heavily on your notes.

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