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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

A Moving Syllabus

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What do you know to be true now that you used to think was false? What do you know to be false now that you used to think was true? What is something you've always thought true that remains true?

I once heard a conference presenter ask a version of these questions and now I occasionally use them in my teaching. Such questions suggest that the status of knowing grows and changes, shifts and turns over time. This is good news for teachers and students everywhere!

The pliable character of knowledge is also a political matter. Libraries and lives are filled with stories about the politics of teaching and learning, particularly around matters of deeply held faith convictions and religious practices embodied in various histories, bodies, and communities today.

Learning itself evokes a kind of devotional practice in which the desire to learn and to unlearn are political acts of room-making in the mind, heart, body, soul for more than this moment's capacity. Deep learning is often accompanied by a desire to be moved, even an expansive desire that surprises us in the learning process.

In and beyond my seminary teaching and learning experiences in middle America in this political climate, I am seeing a troubling divergence around the changing status of knowledge: is learning now less or more important than ever? Do expectations of room-making lean toward being moved or rather thirst for antagonistic encounters?

With the striking contrast of embracing the urgency of deepening learning around current social issues such as #syllabi devoted to blacklivesmatter, sanctuary cities, women's health, islamophobia, refugees, and more on one hand, and abandoning intellectualism in favor of relentless questioning sources of expertise or even verifiable facts on the other, how do we teach into a political moment that threatens the status of learning itself?

Five Threats to Syllabi

"It's in the syllabus" is the punch line to many an academic riddle. Syllabi are blueprints, detailed instructions for shared learning experiences. Syllabi outline plans for the way in, through, and out of the course of study. The best syllabi align student learning outcomes, assignments, and learning activities in clear and compelling ways.

A syllabus can also be open to change and can never be totally locked in from the start if it intends to guide a living, breathing classroom. Many syllabi thus include a caveat somewhere that goes something like this: "instructor reserves the right to amend the syllabus for the sake of deepening student learning, but not to add unexpected work." I usually write a version of the first part on my syllabi and discuss the second part in class because change is work, even and especially change for the better amid threats to learning. In this highly charged political moment that pit bodies and communities against each other, I am seeing an increase in five interconnected syllabi threats:

(1) Rejecting Close Reading: I've noticed increased charges of irrelevance of reading that takes time in favor of a formula such as "I used to believe that doing the assigned reading before every class was important, but now I see that it doesn't make a difference." Discourse includes more and more references to headlines and skimmed resources.

(2) Retreating from Deep Connections across Difference: As the political moment threatens to recode inclusion as political correctness, the allure of unrestrained exclusion is appearing in class discussions in relation to readings, to other students, to contemporary figures that appear in a posture of "I don't have anything to learn from you." I have heard this disturbing phrase uttered in the classroom directly twice recently.

(3) Receding Horizon of Moral Imagination: While I think it's a mistake to see empathy as perfectly achievable, the act of considering the consequences of my words and actions for other people and places is critical. Therefore, I welcome many voices from texts read to voices represented in the class to perspectives notably absent from any class. Learning in conversation with many voices requires sustained willingness to consider familiar and unfamiliar perspectives – a requirement that appears less compelling in much public discourse today as relationships between texts, persons, and ideas lean far toward the antagonistic pole

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rather than a desire to be moved.

(4) Pressuring Quick Undisciplined Performance: It can take more time to write more succinctly, yet the pace of twitter both models and encourages quick, undisciplined performance. Respond now! The pressure is on to shortchange the discipline of public discourse for rapid response. There is an art to brevity and real-time public debate that can be learned, but right now time-pressure is relentless.

(5) Acting Out Around Power: Power always flows through teaching and learning, sometimes in more subtle and sometimes in more obvious ways. This political moment is evidencing more blatant efforts of grasping, hiding, pushing, and pulling people and ideas out of the way for the sake of accumulating power.

These five threats aren't unique to the moment, but also describe predictable patterns of dehumanization that we can trace over time through resurgences of oppression that depend on these kinds of threats.[i]

All five of these threats to learning were sharply evident in the classes I taught during the 2016 US Presidential election. This semester, several of the same students enrolled in a different seminar class. What's a teacher to do to support pedagogical response to these syllabus threats to the promise of becoming? How could I respond to these threats pedagogically, helping to transform my teaching plans into a syllabus of becoming?

As a scholar discerning which organizations and conferences to attend, writing projects to adopt, I often ask myself, "to what extent does this support my learning and becoming?" A syllabus of becoming opens this question in the arena of teaching and learning: does this assignment, set of texts, teaching practice invite becoming? A moving syllabus transforms predictable threats into invitations of becoming. I am experimenting with the following responses to the above threats to learning: A Syllabus of Becoming

(1) Reading More: In my seminar this semester we are reading fewer texts, but more closely. There is much to read. And sometimes, the very texts needed to translate careful study into prophetic and pastoral speech in today's contexts are not yet written. So we are also creating original texts that are not eliminating, but beautifully and quite unexpectedly responding to the above threats.

(2) Connecting to a Sacred Third Text: Every week, the seminar shares in common assigned reading of published texts and reading of the class itself.[ii] In addition, I invited each student to choose a third text that they consider sacred in their context. Across the first half of the semester, students have engaged lectionary readings, other Bible texts, a musician's canon, music in general, visual art, photography, and poetry. Assigning a search for the sacred without predetermining the form has opened unexpected depth this semester.

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(3) Imagining Publics, Remembering What's at Stake: In crafting the short weekly writing assignment, I left open the possibility that the set of texts we produce, or a subset of them, could be assembled as a devotional resource for a larger public within and/or beyond the seminary. Reading the first half of Patrick B. Reyes's new book *Nobody Cries When We Die****[iii]*** early in the semester has provided language for remembering the real lives and loves at stake in reading and writing about human suffering and healing. An imaginary public also joins the room when each student reads their reflection aloud during class each week.

(4) Practicing Every Week: Even though the pace of reading, writing, and conversation is deliberately slowed down with less reading and shorter writing assignments, I am amazed how class time flies by. Instead of the increased resistance and fatigue with many of the same students last semester in which I decided to scale back on practice in class (we were all exhausted and shocked albeit for many reasons), in this seminar, energy is sustained at a high register. Weekly practice with each other is creating room for mutual invitation, calling out profound connections between texts and students.

(5) Sharing Voice and Power: Instead of coordinated turn-taking across the arc of the semester with different student presentations different weeks, I am trying a model where everyone shares their brief reflection or summary of it every week. Instead of power-grabbing, there are palpable and powerful moments of power-sharing every week.

Politics are interwoven with personality and it doesn't escape me that every class is its own microcosm so that what works in one class can be less successful in another and vice versa. However, I am astonished that structuring a syllabus of becoming has not only tempered palpable threats of the contemporary moment, but also made room for invitations of becoming.

When discouraged at the very real threats to learning at this historical moment, I am reminded of the power and promise of a syllabus moving toward room-making. What have you found moving in your teaching and learning in such a time as this?

[i] To interrogate this point with my students, we are reading Beverly Eileen Miltchell's *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009). While Mitchell makes plain patterns of threat that contribute to the violence of dehumanization, books like Angela D. Sims, *Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) reminds us how taxing remembering these patterns can be, especially for more made-vulnerable communities.

[ii] The field of pastoral theology uses the metaphor of "the living human document" to point to how humans can learn to read (and misread) each other on par with published texts about human experiences. For a brief overview of this metaphor, see Robert Dykstra's *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005) or a more recent postcolonial interpretation in my "Literacies of Listening: Postcolonial Pastoral Leadership in

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Practice(s),” in *Postcolonial Practice of Ministry: Leadership, Liturgy, and Interfaith Engagement*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan and Stephen Burns (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2016).

[iii] Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016).

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/03/a-moving-syllabus/

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