

Reflective Teaching

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Predictable Misconnections: Teaching and Learning Good Enough to Support Thriving

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Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

December 07, 2017

Tags: assessment | teaching methods | teaching preparation

There are at least two uses of the phrase “good enough.” One meaning commonly found in public discourse denotes minimal, less than best effort. The other meaning, a more technical one from psychology, requires a focused discipline of self-awareness that guards against unhealthy perfectionism (“I can and I will be perfect”) or academic narcissism (“I can and I will know it all”).

I often hear the more negative meaning in theological education: “I don’t want my students to be good enough,” a colleague said to me after reading my recent blog,[1] “I want them to be better than good enough.” After seeing the course learning goal to “define and give examples of good enough pastoral care,” a student remembered a motivational saying from their childhood that ran “good enough is the enemy of excellence.” These are important concerns if good enough means minimal, irresponsible engagement.

However, taken as a discipline of ongoing rigorous self-awareness, good enough teaching and learning is an important part of pedagogical excellence. I believe teaching and learning must be good enough, in this sense, to support thriving.[2] Good enough teaching and learning involves identifying and responding to the predictable misconnections in our craft so that thriving is an available possibility for all teachers and learners.

A Mishap in Connecting the Dots

I recently made a teaching mistake involving extreme connect-the-dots. While I was familiar with the burgeoning market of adult mindfulness coloring books, a colleague introduced me to “extreme connect-the-dots” at a theory-heavy small academic meeting. The meeting involved wonderful academic papers and a lot of sitting and listening, and the exercise provided a strategy for mindful focusing. I was surprised that connecting the tiny numbered dots from one-to-seven-hundred-and-something to make my own dot-to-dot “Mona Lisa” did help me focus.

Later, I decided to try this in my classroom in a week-long intensive course that met from 8:30 am-5:00 pm for five days straight. I am always up for new strategies for focus and energy in such a setting! In addition to trustworthy strategies like varying course activities and scheduling mid-week field work, I purchased an extreme connect-the-dot book called something like “florals and other calming themes.” I tried out a few and then distributed some pages I had not yet completed myself. This turned out to be a mistake.

During the mid-morning break the first day, a student came up and said that I might want to take a look at how she had connected the dots. To my surprise, once the dots were connected, one “floral and other calming theme” image depicted a human being in troubling cultural stereotype. Embarrassed, I ended that connect-the-dot opportunity and replaced it with coloring sheets.

After processing the mishap with my student, I decided not to use class time to address the event since other students had not worked on the images. In hindsight, not disclosing what had happened to other students was likely a missed teaching and learning moment that could have benefitted the class. While not perfect, the class went well, overall.

An Overall, Good Enough Class

Overcoming the felt need for pedagogical perfection is a constant struggle. I am increasingly wary of the word “perfect” in my home or classroom. When my son was in preschool, one day he said, “my day was good, overall.” Struck by his use of the word “overall,” I asked what he meant. He said that anyone can make three mess ups and have an overall good day. He proceeded to tell me about his mess ups that day—not listening, not paying attention to his body in space, hurting someone’s feelings. He explained that tomorrow you can do better if you work on these mess ups today.

As a pastoral theologian invested in good enough teaching and learning, I find the idea of an overall good enough day to be a helpful assessment tool. I hope to train and learn with budding theologians whose excellence includes (1) being aware that they will inevitably make mistakes and (2) practicing the courage needed to address and learn from mess ups in order to (3) be ever mindful of confessing and minimizing harm in the world.

A good enough learning environment is not perfect, but rather thoughtful and open to continued learning. One way to connect the dots before class, metaphorically, is to think about the students and teachers who do not have the luxury of making mistakes, not even one minor mess up in a day not to mention three.

Absurd Expectations

Academic pressures around perfectionism often have complex aspects. Immigration, poverty, identity politics, the school to prison pipeline, and uneven preparation for graduate education from preschool to PhD contribute additional stress for some students who have to fight for a place at a table that likely was designed without “them” in mind. These same systemic pressures force some students and teachers to have to be perfect in unhealthy ways - no learning curve, no grace in student evaluations, no wiggle room for mistakes. If only we could connect the dots ahead of time, theological educators could better support colleagues and students who live and learn with such heightened anxiety.

“Would you rather imagine me be in prison or in school,” asked a DACA recipient who was talking with my class about the fragility of his citizenship status that pressures him to excel in all areas as a student. With a high school GPA above 4.0, multiple leadership experiences in school and extracurricular activities, and a model resume already at a young age, he recognizes the absurd expectations placed on him to be able to have a chance at keeping his family together.

“Imagine,” writes bell hooks, “what it is like to be taught by a teacher who does not believe you are fully human [and therefore] really believes [you] are incapable of learning.”[3] It’s not hard for my DACA recipient friend and teacher to imagine. With my citizenship and other privileges, I commit to stretch my imagination to connect the dots so that no one is dehumanized in my classes, so that everyone has a chance to be good enough, to have overall good days, to thrive in their dreams. And yet the learning around that must be on-going rather than a static perfection.

Dreaming of an Open Invitation to Good Enough Learning Days

I've been imagining what it would look like to treat my syllabus, booklists, classroom space arrangements, and use of time, assignments, and discussions as working together to open a pathway for belonging when absurd expectations exclude some students from thriving. What does it feel like when everything is instead working well in a learning environment?

For me, on the best good enough learning days (1) I feel prepared enough, (2) students arrive prepared and energetic enough, (3) there is enough of a sense that the subject at hand matters deeply, (4) multiple voices and perspectives are voiced and heard, (5) students and I hear new connections and disconnections verbalized in the learning encounter, (6) unanticipated new insights and questions deepen conversation, (7) we are all still thinking about the class beyond the constraints of our time together in a classroom or online, and (8) something from the class may spill over into coffee conversations, office hours, semester assignments, even program assessment. On your best good enough learning days, what would you add?

Indeed, such a day would really be a good enough learning day! I conclude these reflections with some open questions for theological educators teaching religion in a politically challenging time. Are really good days available to all of the students in my class or the colleagues in my school? How about in your context? On each account, what are the avenues of participation for students and faculty? What are the roadblocks? What collaborations, accountabilities, self-reflection habits, and continuing education will help me connect as many dots as possible in advance of the class? How will I identify and respond to predictable misconceptions in real time? How can theological educators work strategically in our own classrooms and across institutions to support dreamers' thriving?

[1] This blog follows from a previous blog entitled "The Privilege of Good Enough? Challenges of Radical Hospitality in Theological Education," published November 9, 2017, at <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/11/privilege-good-enough-challenges-radical-hospitality-theological-education/>

[2] I have in mind supporting the thriving dreams of all who embark in teaching and learning in hopes of honing critical tools and collaborative practices to address a suffering world yearning for new ideas and strategies of transformation. I also have in mind Dreamers as the group of students who seek support for more humane immigration reform. I dedicate this blog to the tenacity of the Dreamers who teach me to work for systems that allow good enough teaching and learning to be available to all. For further information in this historical moment, download a toolkit to support Dreamers here: <http://www.scholarshipsaz.org/students/educators/>.

[3] bell hooks, *Teaching critical thinking*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, p. 2.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/12/predictable-misconnections-teaching-learning-good-enough-support-thriving/>