



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



"When Less is More": Using What You've Got to Deal with Trauma

Richard Newton, *University of Alabama (formerly Elizabethtown College)*

Blog Series: Teaching and Traumatic Events

February 20, 2018

Tags: teaching methods | teaching strategies | teaching and trauma

Trauma is like a mirror that we don't want to look into. It captures us at our worst angles. It accentuates what we want minimized and overlooks what we wish to be prominent. In trauma, we see projected the unwanted aspects of our realities in such a startling way that we forget everything over which we might have control.

Sometimes we don't have control over a lot. And if we are lucky, we are graced with a reminder that less can be more. To be clear, I don't mean to make asceticism a virtue. Rather, I want to honor the irrelevant revelation where many on the brink find humor and solace—the fleeting thought of how “it could be worse.” On the flip side of that sentiment is an appreciation for the chance to no longer take what one has for granted. It is this latter posture that I think we teachers should become more accustomed to inhabit.

If you follow me on social media, then you know that half of my best pedagogy comes from lessons learned while parenting. As I write, my six-year-old is wrestling in his first tournament. Kid Newton loves the sport. I like that he loves it. But the anxiety in the gym is as airborne as the body odor. And as these children face off, I can read the look in their faces. They are not scared of each other. They are afraid of their own limitations.

Throughout this tournament, I have seen a lot of different coaching styles. I don't have the foggiest idea about wrestling technique, yet I do know enough about teaching-learning to see what isn't working. And the number one way to fail seems to be throwing a lot of new information at a student/athlete in the midst of a stressful situation. This results in a lot of takedowns, tears, and tantrums.

I've also picked up some practices that seem to work on the mat, if not in the classroom. When trauma finds your students, consider having them do the following:

Breathe. At a Wabash consultation, my colleague Dr. Melanie Harris would frequently lead my cohort in a few moments of collective breathing before we dove into the topic of the day. This may have been the single greatest takeaway from these intensive professional development experiences. In just a few silent moments of respiration, I found assurance that I had survived the previous moment and could be present in the current one. My mind stopped wandering to the future. My thoughts stopped dwelling on the past. So when I sense that my students are stressed or at dis-ease, I push pause on whatever we are doing and have us breathe. When we reenter into the activity, we are so much more prepared for what may come.

Have space to be heard, read, and seen. Just like athletes need to breathe, people in trauma need a moment to vent. This doesn't necessarily involve conspicuous expression, but perhaps just a moment to acknowledge what one has observed can go a long way. If I have a sense that we are in the middle of a traumatic moment, I like to start punctually but give students a chance to release their thoughts within the formal classroom time. This gives them license to work through preoccupation rather than be consumed by the trauma occupying them. Sometimes I just quickly name the event and have students free-write individually as they see fit. Other times I announce that we'll take three minutes to talk about (or not) *whatever they think* needs to be discussed. In this situation, I move to the side of the classroom so that students can relate to each other as peers instead of to me as their instructor. When we move to our next activity, students seem to be calmer and more collected.

Relax in their strengths. The traumatic moment can be a teachable moment, but not for skill acquisition. This is not the time to trot out radically new content. Instead, consider how you can bring out the things students know. What are the things that have been practiced, drilled, and rehearsed? Giving students a chance to bring these out will orient them toward the "more" ahead. Leaving a little room for free association or creative application can even bring a little hope in the midst of despair. As students rise to the occasion of just one task, they can remember that they have risen before and will rise again.

None of these activities are novel. In fact, if you incorporate them into your regular teaching practices, they'll be that much more effective in moments of testing. At the end of the day, the challenge isn't ending the trauma. It is dealing with it. Just remember that you, in fact, do have the tools to begin doing so.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/02/less-using-youve-got-deal-trauma/>

