

Reflective Teaching

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“There’s No Place Like Home . . . “ Unless You Want to Learn

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“Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

So many of our students have a “Dorothy” experience when they enter theological and religious education. Our classrooms are not what they have had previous experience of. Our classrooms are not the local church, not Bible college, not the family reunion, not church camp, not church conference, not undergraduate school, not job site; not anything like they have ever had to traverse. The location of our adult classrooms, for many students, is unique. And, once the degree is received, it will be a space to which they never return. Our classrooms, for so many, are the most foreign space they have ever ventured into. So many students are out of their comfort zones. They are away from home.

While our teaching goals are rarely to comfort our students, teaching students who are upset, distressed, and skittish does not make for good teaching or good learning.

Like many schools, we have a growing number of commuter students. My school draws from the boroughs of New York City, Jersey City, and Newark. While those of us who are familiar with living in the suburbs do not think of it as a “dangerous” space, those brothers and sisters who call the city home can find thick forests and dimly lit walking trails to be a problem.

One night after class I was walking home. Home was on the other side of campus. Between the building where I taught and home was the baseball field, then an expanse of unlit trails

through the campus arboretum. I had walked this route at night for many years with no fear or trepidation. After class, I passed a student getting into his car. Edgar (not his real name) was headed back to the City. We quickly exchanged after-class-pleasantries, then I resumed my walk toward the woods. Edgar called out to me in a concerned tone, "Doc, where you headed?!" I turned around and told him I was headed home and said, "Good night." Edgar got in his car, raced around the parking lot until he caught up to me. He rolled down his car window and in a distressed tone called me to his car. I walked over-not sure what was wrong. He asked if I was going to walk through the woods-in the dark, alone. I said yes. He asked, "Please let me drive you home." Feeling Edgar's concern for me, I got in the car. During our five-minute drive, he expressed his anxiety for being in "the country." I told him I had lived here for many years and felt comfortable walking, even in the dark, in spaces I had come to know. He told me that if I needed a ride home after class for the rest of the semester that he would gladly drive me home.

Before this experience, I had considered that students might be uncomfortable with new ideas or new people or new values presented in our classrooms. I had not previously considered that students might be uncomfortable with being "in the country"-away from the city-uncomfortable in the terrain where they did not know the rules and the pathways were, literally, unlit. Suppose an obstacle to good teaching is the literal space we occupy? What if we have city people who have ventured to the country, or country people who have ventured to the city, and are fearful of this unfamiliar space? In either regard we have students who are distracted by their uncertain safety, worried if they will get back home safely and without incident. What does it mean to teach with this kind of discomfort in the room?

Dorothy, of *The Wizard of Oz*, turned her situation into a quest. She constructed a journey which eventuated in her return home. So many of our students are not on a quest; they simply want to get a degree and the degree-giving-place is located in a place that is very foreign, a long way from home, but commutable. They commute to the foreign place and then return home each week. I suspect some students resign themselves to being uncomfortable for the duration of their education.

Complicating the discomfort and anxieties of our students, another dimension to their discomfort is the experience of possibility. Author bell hooks said, "*The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.*" So many students resist encounters with "radical spaces of possibility" preferring instead spaces which are reliable and previously known.

My first teaching challenge was at age thirteen when I taught elementary-aged children in my

church's summer day camp. Snack time was a favorite moment in the day's schedule. The teachers would gather all the children in one room and provide fruit as a snack. Ralph, age 10, never ate his fruit snack. He would complain and ask for cookies or chips. One day I sat with Ralph who was pouting. I asked, in earnest, why he would not eat the fruit. He said, "Because you don't know what you're going to get." I told him that I did not understand. Ralph said, "If you eat an orange you don't know if it's gonna be sweet or sour. It might be juicy or it might be nasty. But if you eat an Oreo - they all taste the same. You know what you're gonna get."

Many of our students find our classrooms too risky with possibility. They simply want to know, like Ralph, that they are going to get what they previously know, what they previously experience as dependable. When we say learning will be discovery, newness, encounter with the unfamiliar, even transformative—the Ralphs in our classrooms recoil. They do not want to be transformed. Some of the resistance and anxiety is that lots of people do not have an adventuresome spirit. Or more to the point, students will say that in their busyness they do not have time for an adventure. The thought of new ideas is worrisome, even burdensome, rather than motivational or inspirational. Students' discomfort about risking the randomness of learning is anxiety producing and can make our classrooms woeful.

The spring semester is upon us and my syllabus is prepared. Even so, I do not have strategies to relieve the many real discomforts, anxieties, and fears of my students. Edgars and Ralphs will likely be in my course as well as a few new kinds of fears I have yet to catalogue. By now I have enough experience to know that much learning can happen even when fears, uncertainties, and reservations are not calmed or eased. Beyond that, I know I need to be a non-anxious presence for the sake of all of my students and me.

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