



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Excursions, Pilgrimages, Field Trips - Marvelous Learning!

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

March 02, 2020

Tags: student learning | engaged learning | learning

The Liberty Bell. The Franklin Institute. The Betsy Ross House. The Philadelphia Zoo and Botanical Gardens. The Art Museum (infamous for the Rocky run up the stairs). Boat House Row. The Library. My brother and I attended public schools in Philadelphia, and these were some of the places we visited on trip days. These days were marvelous! Each trip brought great anticipation. We were thrilled about going, doing, being outside of the school building and away from the routine of the classroom setting. Our excitement, and the excitement of our classmates, was palpable. The excitement burst from the classroom into our household. There were permission slips to be signed, brown bag lunches to be packed, and outfits appropriate for the trip to be laid out the night before. Once we returned from the trip, the stories of what happened and what we experienced carried us for days.

Certain people and some kinds of experiences cannot and should not be brought into the classroom confines. Certain knowledge is best encountered in community, in neighborhood, in museums, in parks, and even on rivers and while crossing over oceans. Taking students to new lands, to meet new peoples, to encounter new smells, tastes, sounds, sights, feels and ideas summons the imagination which is too often dampened in classroom spaces.

My hunch is that there are mysteries, experiences, knowledges, and truths which refuse to

enter into the classroom; these understandings require learners to participate in excursions, pilgrimages, and field trips. In other words, some of the best learning happens outside of the classroom. Learners must leave home to learn.

If done correctly, excursions guarantee a decrease in a teacher's control of learning and an increase in a student's control of learning. Many teachers who, for example, have taken learners to the zoo to view the new born panda only to have little Jane or Johnnie be fascinated by the flock of pigeons and never once pay any attention to the pandas. Pigeons were not on the syllabus and will not be on the test! What if learning resists domestication? What if the better learning does not tame us, but instead makes us wild, unruly and free? What if, when given the chance, learners set their paths in such a way as to render our established curricular choices as being contrived and unhelpful in the landscape of the 21st century? What if the roads discovered while learning are more interesting than the roads mapped by teachers?

The longer I teach adults, especially scholars, the more I work-at giving up control of their learning and allowing them to "go" by themselves into learning experiences. In several classes, I required students design their own excursions based upon the themes we were studying in my course. Students were instructed not to go anywhere alone; they had to take someone from class or from their family or friends or church members. I required that the student facilitate a conversation with the accompanying persons and include the comments and impressions (based upon course learning outcomes) of their companions in their excursion report. Some of the most successful learning of students happened when they went into the world with their teenaged children or their church deacons - going together to places they had not been and talking with persons they had previously had no discussions.

I learned from my colleague, Heather Elkins, that some excursions are pilgrimages. Sometimes, leaving the classroom requires the search for and journey to holiness and wholeness. I have had the privilege of witnessing the movement of the Holy Spirit with my students in New York City, Newark, Maui, Accra, Dublin and Long Branch, New Jersey. Sometimes we were in a retreat setting - there for an intensive course. And other times we were traveling together for weeks - crossing borders, visiting our global neighbors in their own homes, mosques and shrines. Pilgrimage learning takes ahold of entire groups and brings expected and unexpected lessons for teacher and learner, alike.

My advice is to resist trying to orchestrate trips which demonstrate the theory you are teaching in class as if the theory is in action in the world. Teaching and learning is much more complicated than this - learning defies this mundane dichotomy. Instead, ask yourself: Which colleagues' work is best encountered, viewed, and metabolized in a visit to their studios, offices, shops, pulpits, and places of business? What trip will best assist students with connecting the knowledge they have with the knowledge they need? What experience will challenge the normative gaze of students and allow them a new vantage point upon the complexity of a craft worth seeing differently and better? Then - design a trip.

Excursions, field trips, and pilgrimages must not become logistical nightmares; teachers are

not travel agents nor concierges. And, refrain from trips where the passivity of the classroom is duplicated in the field. Students leaving the classroom to sit in different chairs to hear someone else lecture is not optimal. Take students, body-mind-soul, into the world so they can encounter the unknown and the previously misconstrued. My most agile traveling students have always been my international students. I suppose it makes sense. If you are courageous enough to leave home and settle in a new country to learn – going to NYC is welcomed – journeying to learn is your motif. My most fearful students were those who had never traveled on urban public transportation and wanted me to rent a bus from New Jersey to New York so they would not have to bump-up-against the peoples. I paired the fearful students with the international students and off we went to see what there was to see (via NJ Transit and NYC subway). We all survived!

Sometimes, mystery tiptoes around pedagogical mundanity and refuses to reveal its riches until we take or send our students out into the world. Avoid the mundane and design encounters for your students which will surprise, delight, befuddle, and amaze. What my brother and I remember most about our childhood field trips is that they were days of fun. Learning moved from the daily routine and became enjoyable. Plan experiences for your students and for yourself which bring fun and joy into the collective learning.

I have just returned from my annual pilgrimage to the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC). It was great fun and much joy! SDPC convenes leaders from the academy, church and community to discuss issues of justice. This year more than one thousand persons attended the Washington DC conference. Also present were two hundred fourteen seminarians attending the conference for academic credit. This excursion keeps me informed and reminds me of the critical importance of partners and collaborators. The plenary speakers, workshop leaders, preachers and musicians assist me in thinking through the social, economic, and political realities which so greatly impact the teaching and learning in colleges, universities and seminaries. Like the trips in elementary school, my excursion to SDPC renewed my spirit and sent me back to the Wabash Center with new questions and refreshed curiosities.

The Wabash Center is a destination for those teachers who want to leave home in order to learn. We are an excursion, a field trip, and in many cases, a pilgrimage. What would it mean for the Wabash Center to expand and deepen the experience of learning by teachers? If the better learning requires leaving the familiar for the unfamiliar, in what ways might the Wabash Center become “unfamiliar” even for the most seasoned teacher? In what ways might the Wabash Center pitch a wider tent for more pilgrims who fear domestication and who are willing to risk gathering and scattering to kindle and rekindle the delight of learning while a teacher?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/03/excursions-pilgrimages-field-trips-marvelous-learning/>