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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Questions to Meet the Anxiety in the [Virtual] Room

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It isn't over. "It," of course, is the Covid-19 crisis that has moved students, faculty and staff off our physical campuses, moved learning to online platforms, and disrupted the normal rhythms of an academic year. What is certain right now is what is not happening: honors ceremonies, graduations, conferences and research days, sports, dances, and chance encounters with friends and colleagues on walks across the quad. Everything else is uncertain, unbounded, unknowable in its detail, and often frightening, especially as this crisis is malleable and continues to unfold globally. It is an anxious time.

That anxiety is in our [Zoom, Google, WebX, Canvas] classrooms, and despite not having its own picture box, it takes up a lot of space. This leaves faculty in a quandary: should we address the anxiety in the room, potentially inviting difficult or emotional reactions from students, or should we turn away from it, focusing as much as possible on business as usual, even as we acknowledge that nothing is usual right now.

I have written before about using dialogic practices to meet disruption, arguing that structuring classes for curiosity and genuine encounter across difference gives students the tools they need to lean into the wobble that comes from meeting something new or strange. Teaching curiosity, holding up listening as a value, and giving people the tools to do it better creates brave spaces where students can genuinely explore themselves, others, and new ideas. These are skills we all need right now. They allow us to invite the kinds of conversations and reflection that can recognize anxiety and then nudge it toward connection, purpose, and hope.

What does this look like? Last year, after the Tree of Life synagogue and New Zealand mosque

shootings, it meant taking time in class to recognize those events, and then offering a path to agency in the face of horror. I gave each student a 3 x 5 notecard and invited them to finish the sentence “I can . . . ” on one side, and “I will. . . ” on the other. I didn’t collect the cards. Some students report still having them, and one recently called the experience formative in the way she has come to find purpose in the face of overwhelming events.

Right now, it means inviting students to reflect on when they have met challenges before, relationships and connections that are important to them, specific things that the virus has changed, and opportunities that their new situations provide. Doing this has allowed my students to realize that this is not the first time they have successfully met the challenges disruption brings, and to find sources of inner strength and social support as they recall those who helped them before. Asking students to name one thing that has changed for them narrows generalized anxiety, making it concrete and approachable. One student mentioned that “bumping into people” in Zoom meetings, while a poor substitute for the cafeteria encounters they missed, did help fill that gap. Asking about opportunities leads students to think about purpose and even hope in the face of loss. Students talk about the gift of time with siblings and parents, slower and less regulated days, and new grading standards that are letting them dig more deeply into subjects they love.

Taking the time to lean into the discomfort of the current situation also creates and reinforces the social connections that keep the demons of anxiety at bay. I’m on research leave this semester, but invited students I taught in the last year to a Covid-19 dialogue hosted on Zoom late one Friday afternoon. A handful came. We had a genuine and moving conversation using the questions outlined above, and before we dispersed, they asked if we could do it again, every Friday. We can, and we will. This is what hope, connection, and community look like in the face of Covid-19. They’re still here, and so are we.

Suggestions for check-ins (choose one question and invite students to reflect on it for a minute, then report back in one breath):

- • Tell us about one thing that’s made you feel rooted in the last few days.
- • Talk about one person you’re supporting right now.
- • What’s the best thing you decided to do this week?
- • Bring an object from where you are to share. What’s meaningful about it?

For longer discussions:

- • Tell a story about a time you overcame a challenging situation.
- • What strengths did you draw on? Who supported you then?
- • Tell a story that would help us understand what’s changed for you as a result of the virus?
- • What hopes or opportunities might you see in your new situation?

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