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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Home is Where the Classroom Is

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I have a confession to make. When everything moved online in the spring I detested everyone in every Zoom class and work meeting in which I participated. Okay, I didn't quite detest my students and colleagues, but there was great resentment there. I hated working from home. Always have. My home is sacred space—a sanctuary from the difficulties of the world. A place to rest and play. But now all these people were invading my sacred space. I felt like I had turned my home into my classroom/office, and I wanted my home back. All the work-from-home experts talk about having designated areas and divisions. I tried to do that for myself and thought that students would do it for themselves as well. Then I had to design a week-long concentrated class that would meet synchronously on Zoom, and the idea that we would pretend that we were in a classroom separate from our home felt a bit silly for a class running from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day for a week. And while there is something to having a designated work space, my home office is still in my home. So instead of ignoring the fact that we were all in class at home, I incorporated the home. I started by asking myself two questions: What does it mean to invite a class into your home? In what ways is holistic learning enhanced when each person is in their individual sacred space? I now approach all Zoom classes as an additional way to teach to the whole person and now incorporate the home throughout the course.

I begin by asking about the space they have welcomed me into. Many people spend time on their Zoom space as they normally would on their home space when guests are coming over. At the beginning of the class, I ask them to introduce us to their space, whether it be a virtual background or the corner of their home they have prepared for us to see. Backgrounds can also be used as a visual representation of a concept. For my adolescent spirituality class, I

encouraged students to use virtual backgrounds of a place that represents spiritual significance. Most students removed the virtual backgrounds after presenting them, but then spoke about their kitchen in the background, which led to a conversation about eating as a spiritual practice. When discussing the china cabinet behind one student and how the china was passed down from various family members, a conversation began about the spiritual practice of connecting with ancestors—a powerful spiritual practice for many cultures. In my Administrative Leadership class we each choose a background that makes us feel like a leader. If students choose to keep their cameras off, they can pick a picture for us to see instead. These exercises allow us to explore a concept through visual representation. This is often done in physical classes through pictures. Why not do this in Zoom classrooms with backgrounds and homes?

An educator can also incorporate their students' homes by asking class participants to find something in their home that represents a particular concept or theory being discussed in class. Certainly, not everybody has the same things accessible to them in their homes and the goal is not to show off what one has, but since any understood concept can be explained by just about any symbol, students can deepen their understanding by articulating a concept using a symbol and learn the complexities of a concept or theory by hearing their classmates do the same. I also design activities that can be done with other people in students' homes. This is a little trickier because of the variety of living situations; I certainly do not want to pry. So, I acknowledge the diversity and simply note assignments which students can do with other people if they so choose. Once I embraced the process, the opportunities to incorporate the home seem endless.

The fact is, we are not divided beings. I always work from home even if that means coming up with an idea in the shower or discussing over dinner that interesting thing a student said. I am not a divided person, and neither are my students. Teaching to the whole person means incorporating the space where the teaching occurs. Teaching and learning are sacred wherever they occur, and the learning space is so much richer, fuller, and wonderfully complex when it is the space that individuals have spent lots of time designing, cultivating, and nurturing. I am truly grateful for the invitation.

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