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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Teach Them How to Learn

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More important than any topic I teach is teaching my students how to learn. Facts can change. The percentage of Christians in the United States that I teach first-year students today may be different by the time they graduate. The anti-racism landscape in this particular moment is different from the one laid out the 2014 *Religion and Popular Culture* textbook I use. What will the situation in Myanmar be like in a few years? Such facts, on their own, aren't worth much beyond the grade they might get a student if she successfully memorizes and regurgitates them on a test. But skills—in question asking, in studying, in note taking, in writing, in critiquing, in empathy, in appreciating differences, in recognizing our own limitations, in knowing what motivates us and why we (do or should) care—are what will stay with students, long after they leave my class and go out into the world.

Many faculty grumble these days about lowering admissions standards and how students are so much less prepared now than they were back in the "good old days." Part of it, of course, is a pandemic. Sophomores at my university missed the end of their senior year of high school (with its important rites of passage, like prom and graduation) and they had a totally online first year in college, with its isolation, Zoom fatigue, and poor pedagogy (not exactly ideal). None of us are at our best. Part of it, too, is shifts in K-12 education, the pressures of standardized testing, the diversification and democratization of higher education, and the rise of a new generation, with all of its own quirks.

But, like many other educators before me, I'm persuaded that we need to meet students where they are. We need to teach the students we have. If a skill is necessary for success in my class, then it is something I teach. If I want students to write essays, for example, I can't assume they will even know what I'm asking for (since professors in other disciplines, even in my own department, may not mean the same thing by that word—one of Dan Melzer's very interesting findings from *Assignments Across the Curriculum*), let alone how to write an "essay" well. Without such explicit instruction, I'm simply rewarding the students who came into my class already knowing how to do the thing, which basically just rewards students of certain demographics who are already advantaged anyway. Not good.

Usually college campuses have a lot of great resources to support students "learning how to learn" (sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of "meta-cognition," which simply means thinking about how you think). We have a Learning Center here, with support for writing, presentations, and more, as well as a Learning Strategies Center that I always recommend to students for just these purposes. And there are a few books I regularly turn to for inspiration, including Saundra Yancy McGuire's *Teach Students How to Learn* (and its companion, *Teach Yourself How to Learn*, for students).

But I include various opportunities in my classes too, since research into how we learn demonstrates how effective it is to teach with meta-cognition in mind. Here is a sampling of what I've tried:

- I ask students what the purpose of studying religion even is, assign them the task of looking around online for justifications, and then have them write what the point of studying one of their other subjects is. Why bother? Who cares? Let's figure out why this is worth our time.
- We talk about the origins of the study of religion, as well as concerns/critiques of the term and its associated field, and I encourage them to investigate the history of their other disciplines.
- I assign Anne Lamott's "Shitty First Drafts" (from her book *Bird by Bird*) and I ask students what they learned about the writing process from the piece, as well as which strategies they'd like to try. I show them some peer-review comments on an article of my own (and point out how much meaner scholars are to one another than I am to them!), but only after I show them the fancy-looking published piece. They need to understand that what's final and polished is only a very small part of a long, arduous, and usually invisible process, which even experts undergo.
- I ask students how they might be able to use persuasive writing in other contexts. When you apply for a job, what are you doing in your cover letter? You are trying to make a persuasive argument (hire me!) and support it with reasoning and evidence (here's my past work experience, here are my relevant skills). Practice this skill in my class; apply it for the rest of your lives.
- I convey that something like writing (or math, as Carol Dweck originally studied) is a skill and can be learned with practice, over time, vs. something fixed and static. I share examples from my own life (along with embarrassments and failures) of learning, such as

my bike-riding journey.

- I ask students to share their annotation strategies after doing a reading and show a projection of some of the notes I've taken on the same piece (highlighting what I made notes on, as well as how and why); I ask them to write down new note-taking strategies they'd like to try.
- I put students in groups or assign reading responses and ask them to figure out what the main argument in a scholarly article is, how that author supports the argument (i.e., with reasoning and evidence), and what their confusions and critiques are. I explain this is the same process I use, as laid out on the rubric, for reading and evaluating their own papers.
- I ask students to put the scholars' ideas or claims into their own words, in class and on exams.
- I try to make exams, which are online and not timed, uncheatable (inspired by the work of James Lang), by asking students to apply what they've learned to novel and often current contexts (e.g., which definition of "pop culture" does this tweet from the Dalai Lama exemplify and why?)
- I have students fill out "exam wrappers," in which after a test they reflect on their preparation and study strategies, what seemed to work well and what didn't, what kinds of questions they missed (and what happened), and how they will adjust their approach for future tests.
- We generate a list of self-care strategies that can help students de-stress, especially around midterms. We do breathing exercises and body scans in class to help relax them for the day.
- I tell them about relevant research into how students (really, all people) learn: for instance, if they don't take notes in class, and review those same notes, they basically won't remember anything later on; if they cram right before a test, they might do okay, grade-wise, but they won't retain anything for the next (cumulative) one.
- I tell students that we all learn better when we care about something, when we can discover the relevance to our own lives. I have them write weekly reflections that ask for a connection between what they learned in class and their lives outside of the classroom. I ask them, in small groups in class, to generate real examples of what we're discussing that day (e.g., how have you noticed religion creating community in the world around you?)
- I tell them about various phenomena, like the Dunning-Kruger effect or confirmation bias, so they can be more aware of their own tendencies and correct for them. I ask them to share examples. In class, I read the children's book *They All Saw a Cat*, which emphasizes differences in perceptions and how even our own views of ourselves are inevitably only partial, limited.
- I am experimenting with "ungrading" to put more of the responsibility and reflection into their own hands.
- On the final exam, I ask students what the most important thing they learned in the class was. (They rarely list some fact; instead, many of them write: "I learned how to think. Thank you.")

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