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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Teaching as a Response to Lives in Motion - Part 2

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To recap our context, we have been working on our Wabash-sponsored project on trauma, religion, and pedagogy and have consulted with Dr. James Finley twice. In our first blog post, we reflected upon the importance of community building and reconceptualizing teaching outcomes from the perspective of trauma-informed pedagogy as cultivating intentions of life-long learning. In this second post, we delve into a possible classroom exercise focused on the practice of patience.

"What is the gift you want to share with your students?"

Teaching is giving ourselves away in and to Love—as mystics do to the ultimate "O/other" in their contemplation and writings. This was one of the important remarks we received from Dr. Jim Finley, a psychologist and mystic, in our consultation with him.

To begin, we would like to remind ourselves that trauma-informed pedagogy aims to hold and foster the holistic being of each participant, including the instructor's, encompassing their woundedness. Suffering and trauma are an inevitable part of our lived experiences. A trauma-informed pedagogy requires us to alter our attitude toward human limitedness: it is not something that should be overcome but a valuable opportunity for discernment. Our precarious, complex, and embodied experience of the world invites us to cultivate our sensitivities and responses to personal issues and social injustice. If we borrow spiritual language, mystery, and even emptiness, can be a locus where deep awakening may take place.

Such a holistic attitude toward limitation also reaffirms the importance of teaching humanities.

The death of humanities discourse is no longer a surprise and many of us have been urged to rethink pedagogy after the appearance of ChatGPT, which brought sweeping changes in student learning and writing. To acknowledge the significance of empirical science, however, is also to recognize that human experience consists of more than inventions and uses of technology. We should allow ourselves to ask unanswerable questions about the unknown and unstable dimensions of reality that both fascinate and intimidate us.

Trauma is one of the very loci where we can tap into a space of the unknown, where we have an invitation to form deep intimacy within ourselves and, in some cases, with others (only if they are respectful, nonjudgmental, and can hold confidentiality). One of the important assumptions of a trauma-informed classroom is the sense that we must practice patience, gentleness, and compassion when tender experiences arise. Therefore, we need assignments and practices that help us cultivate this compassionate stance when it comes to our reading and writing. Dr. Finley suggested adapting the ancient contemplative practice of Lectio Divina as a way to approach the assigned readings. We further propose that this practice can be extended to enable a close and spiritual reading of texts, especially difficult ones about human suffering, which can empower students toward intellectual and internal growth in their reflections.

This in-depth reading starts with listening to, "taking in" texts. The result of this discursive, meditative reading must be recorded in the form of ungraded journaling. In this step of the assignment, it is important for instructors to acknowledge students' fear of writing. (Often, if not always, undergraduate students' problematic use of technology or plagiarism comes from anxiety around making mistakes and receiving bad grades as punishment). The purpose of this ungraded journaling is to express oneself out—it is to recognize one's own voice and to trust one's own intuition as one listens deeply and openly to the text as well as to one's own inner world. It is a moment when one tries to form intimacy with, be patiently present with, and gravitate toward oneself. It is also a moment when trauma might erupt unexpectedly and overwhelmingly. We acknowledge that such a moment would be the kernel of trauma-informed writing. If the student is ready, deep awareness and sensitivity toward the self and the world—and perhaps healing—can begin. Technology cannot and should not replace such profound, unpredictable, and humane learning moments.

Since this exercise may invoke student anxiety, the instructor may tweak it depending on reading materials and pedagogical contexts. It could be modified into a timed writing exercise, or students may further reflect upon the writing exercise itself. Moreover, this journaling must entail editing (rewriting) processes. This is a chance for students to choose what they want to share for submission to the instructor or to the class at large: ensuring their consent and safety is paramount.

As we noted in our previous post, it is extremely important to form a safe learning environment when encountering various forms of trauma in the classroom. In addition, in this writing practice students themselves are given an opportunity to actively create a safe writing space for themselves. Again, the instructor must remind students to slow down in their rewriting,

since hasty editing can re-traumatize the writer: in the process, one may encounter their inner critic, a sign of perpetual violence that they have experienced and internalized. Sharing deep reflection with oneself and then another is, indeed, a courageous and possibly life-affirming act of giving ourselves to Love.

Ultimately, trauma-informed teaching and learning could be a process where we learn to trust in the infinite love offered to wounded people, to borrow Dr. Finley's expression. It is an endless process of forming intimacy with ourselves and others, trusting that we have the capacity to hold each other as broken beings. We hope that in-depth reading and writing exercises will assist students in gaining their own voices, however slowly. It is a practice built upon patience and mercy, designed to help us form nonjudgmental empathy for ourselves and extend it to others.

Needless to say, this is reflected back on instructors since teaching is a mutual act (of course, there are always exceptions). Here, we return to our beginning statement, "What is the gift you want to share with your students?" We teachers are also infinitely loved and wounded beings who are invited to co-create classrooms of care and courage within imperfect institutions, circumstances, and a world in continuous motion.

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