



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Judged by Your Behavior: Talk is Cheap

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

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

June 01, 2024

Tags: pedagogy | evaluation | actions | role model | observations

(An audio recording of this blog may be found [here](#).)

Classroom spaces are places of intimacy and influence. Teaching is a human-to-human encounter.

Course planning typically focuses on the many ways the academic content shapes, forms, and informs students. In our planning, what we too often underestimate, and under plan for, is the personal encounter in the classroom.

Students learn as much from the person who teaches the course as they do from the assigned readings, lectures, and rubrics. Often, they are paying as much attention to the teacher as a person as they are to the theories, concepts and approaches being presented. What if the most formational elements of our courses are the ways we, implicitly and explicitly, perform them?

If we take a moment to consider the ways students learn more from the behaviors and attitudes of the professor than they do from the topic, we will realize that our classes are permeated by our beliefs and commitments. Your classroom behavior makes vivid your personal values.

Are you aware that your personal values are baked into and operative in your courses? Are the

values which undergird your teaching aligned with the institutional values? Are you aware that your personal values are *see-able*, viewable, known by your students? If so, which of your behaviors are inconsistent with your personal values, and which personal values do you wish to make most evident in your teaching?

A facilitator at a recent staff development session I attended said, “We judge ourselves based on our intentions; others judge us by our behaviors.” This resonated with me. In other words, it is not what you *say*, but what you *do* that tells your students your ethics. If you talk the talk without walking the walk, then you have formed students with confusion, misalignment, and uncertainty. Words, platitudes, and good intentions are shallow without observable actions.

It is not enough to have the intent of compassion, hope, courage, dignity — if no one has the experience of these values in interactions with you or through the learning assignments you guide and offer. Colleagues will often say they value such attributes as:

- learner-centered teaching, but then lecture during most sessions, placing themselves as “the expert” in the center of the course and relegating the students to the margins of the conversation.
- community and partnership but assign only individualized assignments to be graded.
- collaboration but offer no group activities as approaches to learning.
- creativity but ask that students simply regurgitate information.
- reliability but rarely return graded assignments in a timely manner.
- persistence but provide no mechanism to award the student who begins the semester with low grades ways to improve the final grade.
- responsibility but provide for no major decisions for students to make concerning their own learning in the course.
- care and compassion for others but limit the scope of the course conversation without including neighborhood projects, adventures, or pilgrimages.
- diversity without including voices other than those deemed as typical, commonplace, and regular.

Designing learning environments and experiences which are congruent with and exemplify your personal values will enhance the learning of your students. Creating this kind of integrity will foster learning experiences which nurture trust and instill confidence in your students.

Sculpting congruence in the classroom can be challenging, even for the most seasoned teacher. Consider these activities to strengthen your teaching:

- Ask a colleague to audit your syllabus for the personal values it communicates. Have a dialogue with the colleague about what they see, sense, and suspect about your values. Discuss ways to align the values you want to be operative in the course with the design of the course.
- Make a list of your personal values. Reflect – ask yourself why you choose these specific values to be exemplified in your teaching. Describe behaviors, practices and habits that are consistent with these personal values. Then, design or redesign a course with the list,

rational and behaviors in mind.

- Ask a colleague to observe your teaching for 3 weeks, 6 weeks, or an entire semester. Ask that they watch for your traits, behaviors, habits which demonstrate the values, beliefs, and philosophies you demonstrate in your classroom.
- At the beginning of the semester, tell your students the values you are pursuing in the course. Decide, with the students, the behaviors which should be promoted for these values.
- Reflect – with a trusted colleague – those behaviors that are inconsistent with your personal values that you portray in the classroom. Decide which one or two behaviors you will work-on in the coming semester for better alignment.

Our behaviors tell a story about who we are, what we value, and what we are about. How we behave toward one another speaks volumes and teaches lessons likely to last a life time.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2024/06/judged-by-your-behavior-talk-is-cheap/>