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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Upgrading from “Small Groups” to “Organized Learning Communities”

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As a teacher, whenever I utter the words, “Okay class, please get into your small working groups,” I remember the sense of dread that I felt when I heard those words as a student.



This semester I’m running an experiment in my Systematic Theology class. It’s the first Master’s level course in theology for nearly all of the students. For many, it’s the first theology course they’ve ever taken. In this context, students need and appreciate time to process their thoughts and reactions to the texts. In the past, I’ve used small working groups.

However, this year, the randomly assigned “small working groups” are gone. We traded them in for collaboratively organized learning communities.

In the first week, students read a short text in class and discussed it with a few neighbors. We read from Paul Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith* about the necessity of risk and doubt in the

theological adventure. They were given time to read and to discuss. Then, we debriefed as a class.



First, we explored the text. The content of the reading itself encouraged students to take the risk and speak up. Then, we shifted to discuss what makes for a productive learning community.

Students named many gifts:

- time keeper (i.e., someone to keep the community focused on the task at hand),
- case studies manager (i.e., someone to apply abstract concepts to practical situations)
- questioner (i.e., someone to press the hard questions)
- dreamer (i.e., someone with vision to imagine other ways to do things)
- connector (i.e., someone who can draw together disparate claims and questions)

At the end, each student claimed his or her gifts, and small learning communities were assigned so that each community had a diversity of gifts. In these communities, gifts have been claimed and affirmed, and everyone is expected to make her or his unique contribution to



the common vision of the task at hand.

Of course, some days we're all just tired, but early results from the experiment are encouraging. On the whole, I haven't seen that look of dread when I say, "Okay class, please gather in your learning communities." There are further theological connections to mine. Yet, even without my saying a word, they are learning something important about beloved community and the gifts of the Spirit as we model an intentional way to organize faithful, diverse folks.

How do you organize student peer groups?

How could this teaching strategy be used in an online setting?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2013/11/upgrading-from-small-groups-to-organized-learning-communities/>