

# Reflective Teaching

REFLECTIVE TEACHING



## Collaboration - Not for the Faint of Heart

Nancy Lynne Westfield, *Drew Theological School*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

November 24, 2015

Tags: collaborative learning | teaching for transformation | syllabus construction | course design

The projects have, at sometimes, crashed and burned. There have been the occasional minor derailments. In several instances there were irreconcilable differences and un-repairable circumstances. Once I declared utter, dismal failure. On the other hand, there have also been profound insights; reports of experiences of magic and awe – accounts of life changing and unanticipated learnings. Most times, the projects are completed, the aims are gained. The cause for pause is that even with success there is a critical note of feedback from students which suggests the end result did not justify the means because of the difficulty, the time consumed, and the demanding nature of the learning methodology. Collaboration is not for the faint of heart.

On the first day of my seminar courses, I routinely give students the opportunity to negotiate a change in the syllabus. This semester, the students negotiated to change the required collaborative assignment to a recommended collaboration. Further, if they choose to collaborate, their dialogue partners could be persons beyond our course enrollment. Their spoken rationale was that collaboration is just too complicated and the logistics were just too demanding. I, also, suspect they did not want to risk their grade on the strength (or weakness) of a peer's efforts. I honored their request. I sympathized with their reticence. I, too, have

had many occasions to collaborate on writing projects, committee work, and administrative tasks. These occasions, whether ultimately successful or not, have been overly time consuming and emotionally draining.

So I ask this very basic question: if students cannot effectively collaborate in coursework assignments, what will it mean for their abilities to collaborate in ministry? The question of collaboration by students leads directly to the question of collaboration by teachers. And then, in answering the question of collaboration by teachers, one must ask about collaboration by administration. This leads to an entire unraveling.

Should students collaborate in course work? Yes and no; only sometimes and hardly ever.

I suspect the question of collaboration would need to be the center of a huge curriculum transformation where the models of theological education are re-thought, re-designed, re-engineered toward community building and relationship tending as primary modes of learning. The curriculum, to be viable, would teach as core values such notions as partnership, coalition building, and the African notion of ubuntu as well as immerse students in models of mutuality in leadership. There would need to be a clear understanding that the curriculum was shaping students into societal change agents for social justice and peace.

Collaboration seems so counter-cultural to the common motifs of lone ranger, top of the pyramid leadership, and sole proprietorship. U.S. culture prides itself on individualism - "pulling one's self up by one's own boot straps." Our government has the checks and balances of the many, but looks to the one for leadership. Our denominational structures, still bastions of patriarchy, are cautiously measured in their change even in the face of certain death. If divinity students learn from pedagogies of collaboration, will their abilities find resonance in the market place of the church and society?

Maybe we do not as much need to teach collaboration as we need to teach negotiation - similar, but different ideas. Donald Trump, like him or not, has become a cultural icon based, in large part, upon his ability to effectively swing a deal. The TV version of Trump does not make vivid the compromise, cooperation, concession, and sacrifice needed to swing the deal. I want students to meet the challenges of working for peace rather than negotiating treaties of war or deals in ministry which are self-serving and opportunistic. Maybe I need to develop course assignments which strengthen students' abilities to negotiate and ask students to report on the compromises, cooperations and concessions which enabled the deal to have buoyancy - hhhmmm.

I find less and less value in assignments which ask students to sit alone with their own

thoughts and write critical essays.

I want students to move toward the enfleshment of notions which allow for penetrating



experiences

of community, for shalom - the Deuteronomic notions of the lion and the lamb lying down together. At the same time, I remember Rev. James Forbes, Pastor Emeriti of The Riverside Church, saying that when the lion and the lamb lay down together - the lamb will be very, very nervous.

My motto, words from Maria Harris, printed at the bottom of my syllabi reads, *If it is not expressly prohibited, consider it a possibility*. Next semester, I am going to expressly prohibit students from re-negotiating the collaborative project.

Let us consider these questions for further thinking:

What kinds of rules, structures, or prepared-ness might assist students for deeper, more worthwhile experiences of collaboration in classroom assignments?

How would the applicant pool and subsequent matriculating class be affected if admission processes required candidates to critically compare and contrast a successful and a failed attempt at collaboration?

Does the digital age rely more or less upon collaboration, i.e. even if use of technology is so often a lone activity, are there overlooked or misunderstood experiences of life in the digital age for which teachers need more understanding and wider critical reflection?

This is the 8th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/11/collaboration-not-for-the-faint-of-heart/>