



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Eye Contact in the Classroom

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The gaze. eager sparkle - happy batting of lashes - signaling "...go!"; cautious, diverted looks - at the floor or just "away"—no!-- down caste/mostly shut eyes, maybe even the downright defiant stare - fixed & cocked....Occasionally the gawk - sheer incredulity & clench. When I think of being a transformative teacher, when I think of ways to use my intuition as a tool in the classroom, I think of learning to watch, notice, and read the eyes of my students - better. Suppose learning to teach deeper requires reading students' bodies as text and the exegetical entry point is to learn the ways of their eyes?

My mind turns to the student who comes to class clad in sunglasses - either actual or metaphorical. I confess that I am glad, sometimes, for the shades because I hesitate to see into the one whose preference is to hide or deceive. I often wonder if these folks are high, drunk or just plain worn out.

The eyes are the windows to the soul ... so they say. Yet, it feels as if we have been desensitized to their ever present beauty. It is difficult enough to teach the mind - if I am to

teach the soul, to deeply see a student and risk being seen – then what? Does my disciplinary expertise prepare for the possible formation or likely disturbance which arises with the power of gazing into the eyes of my students? Does my tenure afford me license to nurture and foster the intimate joining which comes with meaningful regard? When I look at my students and they look back, in what ways are we mutually responsible, conjoined in the sacredness of teaching, co-creators of new universes?



A challenge of looking into the eyes of students is that when our eyes meet, I risk knowing them as human beings with diverse dimensions – so many stories. Their stories tell of triumph, conquest, defeat, joys and woundednesses. The plots of the women morph them before my very eyes into wife, corporate exec, and nana/mee-maw/goo-goo. Men transmute – turn-into Poppa, warrior, husband, and Brotherman. If I am close enough to see their eyes, it is likely I am close enough to smell their fragrance, notice their shoes and be touched in return – no doubt changed.

I am learning to risk looking at them, not with hard eyes of authority, but with soft eyes of expectation and anticipation. I routinely ask students to read aloud an entire essay submitted for grading. I coach the students selected to read. In preparation, I shower them with words of confidence and assurance. Equally important for this learning activity, I prepare the students who are the audience for the reading by chiding them to be open and welcoming as their colleagues disclose their thoughtful work. The first time I gave these instructions I said the following statement as a light-hearted zinger to those who would be listening to the essays. Now, these directions have become part of my script for this perennial learning activity. With a Black-momma eye-roll which communicates (universally) my expectation of behavioral compliance in public spaces, I said, *“When your colleague is reading her essay, do not look upon her as you look upon me – instead (dramatic pause for effect) look upon her with soft eyes. Signal her with your soft eyes your interest in her work. Tell her with your eyes that you recognize she is attempting something very difficult.”* These instructions found great resonance with the students and have been respected each time a student reads aloud his essay.

While soft eyes are not needed for every learning experience or for every teaching moment, consistent awareness of eyes is the working challenge. Eyes who dare look into another’s

inform the seer as well as the seen of the level of dignity and humanity afforded by each. Soft eyes disrupt the fear. We can be, if we allow, made into someone new in the classroom if we risk more than a cursory glance.

I have learned that classrooms are places where you can come to understand yourself in ways that few other spaces can evoke. I am learning that classrooms are also places where you can come to understand another person in ways that few other spaces can provoke. My hunch is that a key to the evocation and the provocation is the willingness to take a long look-see.

This is the 4th post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/09/eye-contact-in-the-classroom/>