



Engaged Teaching in Theology and Religion

Harrison, Renee K.; and Knight, Jennie S.
Palgrave Macmillan Springer Nature, 2015

Book Review

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There is wide agreement that student-centered pedagogies yield deeper student engagement and stronger learning outcomes than more traditional “sage-on-the-stage” teaching does. Learning shines when students are invited and equipped to integrate course content with their own experiences, insights, and prior knowledge. In this volume Renee K. Harrison and Jennie S. Knight reflect on personal experiences in the classroom, explore pedagogical theory, and provide examples of applied practices to create a map of the key elements of engaged pedagogy. The map, divided into four sections, moves from the selfhood of the teacher to teaching methods and course content to community context and engagement.

Harrison and Knight begin with a premise: that the enterprise of teaching involves the very personhood of the teacher. Either we can acknowledge this and cultivate an awareness of our strengths, blind spots, and biases, or we can ignore it. That deep learning involves the very personhood of students is another key premise. Nurturing this two-pronged awareness - that teachers and students do not leave their wider selves at the door of the classroom - is the necessary ground of engaged teaching. Whole persons are welcomed into the classroom and empowered to reflectively integrate course content with who they are.

Sections two and three explore how form and content can either undermine or buttress one another and how, even when teachers aim for the latter, they may unwittingly miss the mark. For example, in classrooms in which more democratic teaching practices are employed, course content may still hew closely to a traditional textual canon, with marginalized voices tacked on at the end. Or content may offer a wide range of perspectives while teaching methods minimize student voices. Ideally, democratic pedagogies and a widened canon reiterate one another.

If the goal of learning is not just knowledge acquisition but transformation and if we are inviting students' whole lives into the process, attending to communal context is likewise crucial. The authors thus cap the volume with strong advocacy for community-based learning (CBL). They discuss the logistical and pedagogical challenges of incorporating community work into courses and illustrate why it is well worth the effort. They offer tools for implementing such work, while acknowledging that sustained success in CBL requires significant institutional buy-in that some teachers may not enjoy.

In fact, a particular strength of this volume is its honesty about engaged teaching practices, which while considered innovative in pedagogical circles, are still perceived in many academic circles as less rigorous and less respectable than more classic methods. Harrison and Knight lament that this should be so especially in theological-religious education, where the integration of curricular and worldly knowledge is paramount. Should engaged teaching not be the norm? Recognizing that teachers will need to calculate risks depending on institutional context, they counsel courage for the sake of students' whole-person integrity - and of the credibility of theological-religious education.

The wisdom conveyed in these pages is clearly hard won, over the course of many years across varied institutions. In distilling their experiences, Harrison and Knight offer their readers a real gift. However, while teachers can benefit from the ideas, strategies, and examples laid out in the book, they should not expect to change their own teaching methods and courses overnight. Rather, this volume invites teachers to an ongoing *practice* of engaged pedagogy that requires continual self-reflection, awareness of institutional and classroom contexts, a willingness to take creative risks, and a commitment to engaging one's students as whole persons. It is a compelling invitation indeed. For those who prize transformative pedagogy, this volume weaves the best of theory and practice in teaching theology and religion - accessibly, comprehensively, and indeed engagingly. Highly recommended for undergraduate, seminary, and graduate teachers alike.

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