

Case Study: Snapshot of a Teaching Practice

Dianne Bergant, from Catholic Theological Union, teaches “to get students to see that what we are doing in class—that is, handing down and re-interpreting our religious tradition from our own social locations—is just what our religious ancestors have always done.” “My goal in this [introductory Old Testament] course is to give my students [about half preparing for ministry in a religious order and half preparing for lay ministries] the intellectual tools they need to read and interpret scripture. I try to get them to understand that everybody interprets what they read or hear from their own social location.” The starting point of her teaching is to help students become aware of the “diversity of situations that condition” their own readings and interpretations.

Bergant introduced the class session we observed with an implicit challenge to the assumptions of some students about the role of women in Catholic tradition. She began the class session with a prayer from St. Teresa, noting that it was St. Teresa’s day in the Calendar of Saints. The prayer provided her with the opportunity to emphasize the role of a woman as “thinker and teacher in the Christian, and Roman Catholic, tradition” several times during the class session. It established a theological framework for the class (“all is passing” and that “God is enough”). It also functioned as a pedagogical device “signaling” for students Bergant’s intention they learn how to combine an affirmation of their religious tradition with a critical stance toward its implications for contemporary life.

She structured the rest of the class session dealing with the book of Genesis to help students continue to “learn how to read” because, as she emphasized, “if you learn how to read, then you can read all other texts.” To develop this capacity, she leads students through the steps of a hermeneutical practice with designated texts each week. A set of pre-assigned questions designed to encourage students to develop the skill of taking responsibility for their own study prepares students to move through these steps, establishing in the repetition of the process, an increasingly familiar shape for each class session. These questions engage students in the problems they will encounter as they read assigned texts. They also remind students of the various social locations of relationships involved in their reading a text.

Bergant begins the practice “in front of the text” by explaining that there are many “different ways of interpreting.” Those ways of interpreting are what readers of texts bring to their reading. Attention to them reminds us of our social locations. When she moves the discussion to historical questions regarding the text, Bergant engages the students in exploring the “worlds behind the text.” When she shifts the discussion of a text to focus on, “say how God was depicted,” then “that’s the world within the text.” She emphasizes that this is no linear process, for descriptions of the “world within the text” typically lead one back to questions “behind the text” about the social location of those who are, in this instance, “depicting God.” Bergant brings the discussion full circle when she asks students to reflect on their discussion to ascertain “how much we have interpreted the text today” and then notes once again “that’s the world in front of the text.”

During the class session she mostly stands or walks about in the front of the conventionally-organized rectangular room, firing questions and eliciting comments prompted by the flow of the discussion, writing student responses on the board, gesticulating strongly to emphasize a point, or gesturing affirmatively when a student raised questions or made observations on the topic at hand. She punctuates the flow of the session with highly animated mini-lectures probing the meaning of the text through a closer look at its historical and cultural context. Often she interrupts these mini-lectures either for a question she wants the students to consider or to answer a student’s request for additional information. This class session was highly interactive and depended on student participation to maintain the momentum of the discussion. Bergant provided firm guidance to the development of the class session, however, as she both elicited and responded to student questions and comments.

Directions:

- a. Read the case.
- b. Identify where Bergant's pedagogical intentions draw students into learning tasks of interpreting texts, situations, or relationships, forming spiritual and/or vocational identity, engaging contextual content and/or agency, and performing skills integral to clergy practice.
- c. Describe the "priestly imagination" toward which her teaching practice is directed?
- d. Identify distinctive influences from her teaching practice that must be taken into account by colleagues in the teaching culture of her school?