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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



When Art Comes to Our Classrooms

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Blog Series: Teaching, Religion, Politics

August 10, 2017

Tags: philosophy of teaching | teaching through the arts | contextual art and teaching

Brazilian writer Eliane Brum tells this story: Vanderley was a man who used to go to an agriculture fair in the south of Brazil with a broomstick saying that this broomstick was a pure breed horse. He was known around as the “little cuckoo guy.” One day I asked him, “Are you really Cuckoo Vanderley?” And he said, “Don’t you think I know this isn’t a pureblood horse? That this is just a stick? But this is my way of thinking about that which I will never have.”

Perhaps we teachers could be more like Vanderley, a little cuckoo, imagining that which we cannot think, have, or teach, and make it our own. Perhaps we can engage a double pedagogical movement: to listen to those students who *actually* have a broomstick and see what meanings they give to it, and help those students who don’t have one to invent a broomstick as a pure breed horse, or whatever else, and make it their own.

Our classrooms need an inventory of broomsticks! Broomsticks that can give us a sense of our reality. In order to do that we need more art! Art helps us access the madness of our realities. Art helps us think and feel differently. Art gives us access to different forms of reasoning of our bodies and our relations in our world. Art wires our brain differently. Art gives us a space beyond objectivity so we can venture into the unknown in order to reshape our realities. Unfortunately, our pedagogies are often centered in objective knowledge, positivistic thinking based on progress, and detached forms of thinking that celebrate a necessary distance between the seeing and the thing seen. Sadly enough, this form of knowledge can’t catch our realities from the point of view of Vanderley. We need something else. We need other venues

and forms of thinking that can help us invent and imagine something that can actually affect our reality. We feel that our objective words can grasp our reality in some forms and yet, it feels also that what we say is like unopened letters that end up returning to us.[1] We can't be transformed only by precise objective readings of our reality. We need the enchantment of the unknown, gray areas of thoughts and beliefs, the uncontrolled parts of our lives, the broomsticks of Vanderley.

The Brazilian theologian, poet, philosopher, and sociologist Rubem Alves lived in the academy for many years and produced many books. One day he realized that his kind of work wouldn't change people. He then started to write short essays and children stories. With the theoretical knowledge he gained, he delved into the abyss of the quotidian life of people by way of children stories. He would mix Escher, Camus, Bachelard, Bach, Celan and many others with daily events in life. I was introduced to art by his theo-poetics writings.

In my classrooms, I am growing more skeptical of only objective readings of realities. We are lost trying to grasp the ever-expansive disasters of our lives. We need rituals! We need art to tap into that aspect where objective knowledge can't go. Words alone can't do it. We need other mediums to express the absurd of our present, to retell stories of pain and trauma of our past and imagine our future. Without addressing the present, reshaping the past, and gaining a good sense of future we will be lead to a future that will continue not to be ours. However, life will be given to those who can invent life in its multiple, timely possibilities. And for that, we need new partners!

When we bring Doris Salcedo to our classrooms we have a much-expanded way of addressing violence, trauma, and loss. When we invite Tania Bruguera and Weiwei to present their works to us, we can have a better sense of repressive governments and societal systems. It is when we wrestle with Favianna Rodriguez, Justin Favela, Guillermo Gómez-Pena, Jacob Lawrence, Kerry James Marshall, and Alvin Ailey Dance that we can wrestle with a flow of white supremacy, race and identity politics. When we deal with the artist Banksy, we can learn about social contestation. When we engage Giuseppe Campuzano and Miguel A. López, we see new figurings of sexualities and gender nuances and immensities. When we open up to know Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist, we can see the complex collective interdisciplinary environmental colonial/postcolonial gaze of native people. It is when we listen and watch Mona Haydar, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar, we can deal with the cultural racial pop culture.

We indeed need more art in our classroom! But we have many challenges to do that. First, we don't feel we have enough expertise to do it. We would need to learn how to teach it. Second, we don't know what to do to assess it. Once in a faculty meeting, I heard from friends that they wish they could use more art but they don't have criteria to evaluate any work of art. Third, art doesn't seem to have the same academic weight. We all know the fight Cornel West had to undergo at Harvard when he was accused by the president Lawrence Summers for not doing proper scholarship when he ventured into recording a rap CD.

Yes, to use art we need to cross these boundaries. We have to venture into that weary space in order to know a little more. But we can start by looking and imagining. And helping our students to look and invent as well. The best “final projects” in my classes are the ones students can imagine and invent. Perhaps we can give up a little of our sense that we have to control every corner of what is to be taught, both for proper reasoning and meaning, but also for coherence. Not to dismiss intellectualism and proper theoretical work, but to actually expand it for better ways to grasp life.

Perhaps we can start by trying some new things out. GO visit a museum, a street artist, a mural. Perhaps we can start by listening to a song, watching a performance in a video, looking at a picture. And let the artists help us expand ourselves and our imagery/imagining. They might help us dream, invent, figure out something else! They might help us see that Vanderley’s broomstick is indeed a pure breed horse! And that we desperately need one too!

[1]Eliane Brum, *O Brasil desassombrado pelas palavras-fantasmas. Como o sonho e a arte podem nos ajudar a acessar a realidade e a romper a paralisia*, https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2017/07/10/opinion/1499694080_981744.html

Resources:

<http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/transvestite-museum-of-peru/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idMJIEFH_ns

<http://postcommodity.com/About.html>

<http://favianna.tumblr.com>

<https://wabash.center/2017/08/art-comes-classrooms/>