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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Confronting Failure and Trauma in the Classroom

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How do theological educators help students face the constant reality of failure? Picture this scenario: a second career divinity student suffers health and financial troubles that impede her studies. The impact of these issues revives past psychological wounds. Enduring this morass of difficulties leads to the student's failure in several class assignments. Further, the weight of the unresolved emotional burdens, partly resurrected through themes in classwork, results in crippling pessimism, angst, and depression. The student begins to conclude that dropping out of school is the only solution despite the negative ramifications this decision will have on her career goals.

What are the pedagogical possibilities for instructors and students with regard to issues of failure both in and out of the classroom? In addition to keeping students aware of campus and local health resources that accommodate various needs (including psychological and counseling services, for instance) instructors can develop a helpful methodological ethos around success and failure in the classroom. As the prophet Jeremiah testified, "You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord: When people fall, do they not get up again? If they go astray, do they not turn back?'" (Jer. 8. 4) Pedagogical strategies for encouraging students to confront and overcome failure begin with instructors modeling a lack of fear in this regard. Teachers

are not perfect. Nor are lectures, teaching plans, or classroom activities executed perfectly at all times. Responding to hiccups in real time classroom settings indicates there is a way back from past failures as well as traumas that may be at the root of student underperformance. This models effective coping strategies for students.

Further, it is helpful to assist students to find ways of processing how the legacy of trauma, both collective and personal, affects learning. Part of the impact of trauma is the defensive posturing in individuals and societies that tends to obscure the origins or initial events that contributed to experiences of upheaval. Theological education, which assists in the dissemination of epistemologies based in critical inquiry, enables students to interrogate traditional and received interpretations, even if, in some cases, only to validate them. Just as the use of critical inquiry in coursework can provide opportunities for facing themes and opening pathways related to trauma in social experience, so can pedagogical strategies, structured in this framework, hone methodological skills of survival and success for students. Developing opportunities for students to enact these strategies also enables instructors to assess the usefulness of particular methods and modes of presentation.

The familiar mantra, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again,” was originally written to encourage students in the educational process. Indeed, teachers can develop specific strategies to help students face problems in classroom performance. These include not only acknowledging difficulties when they arise but also incorporating tactics that analyze obstacles in classroom exercises. For example, tracing patterns or connections, dissecting complications, wrestling with incongruities, working through potential solutions, and testing their implications in classroom exercises model the confrontation skills necessary for overcoming failure. Built on the paradigm of evaluation, critique, and re-evaluation, such teaching methods can help develop the kinds of students who encounter defeat, yet refuse to fail.

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