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Formation in Online Learning

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Students are always already being "formed" in our online classes, whether we mean to have incorporated "formation" into our course designs or not. In this ineluctable process of formation, do the communities of inquiry designed into our online classes align with the norms and values of the communities into which we mean to form our learners?

By "formation" in this post, I do not particularly mean "spiritual formation," but I also do not exclude it. If "spiritual formation" involves the practices and conditions for becoming transformed into the community of disciples to Jesus Christ so too is the instructor of (say) Hebrew Bible, Church History, or Theology also forming learners toward the norms and practices of their respective disciplinary communities. Even before that, however, we are already forming learners into a prior community: the communities of inquiry fostered in our course designs.

Some readers will already know that from a constructivist perspective learning always involves a creative synthesis, accomplished in the learner, of the experiences and insights she brings to the learning moment, with the new information she encounters there. Crafting within herself this new thing, she is changed in the process of constructing for herself new enduring understandings; that is, she is *transformed*. Moreover, again from a constructivist standpoint, this creative enterprise of making meaning happens most reliably in collaboration with other learners and in the generation of public projects; that is, the learner is transformed among and via *community*. Learning, then, is always a matter of transformation in and into community. What, then, will be the norms, practices, and ideology of this learning community, or community of inquiry? To what extent will these be intentional or accidental? How well or poorly will they align with the communities into which we mean our learners to be formed: the community of disciples, or of biblical scholars, or of chaplains, or historians, or theologians?

For example, one enduring understanding that I mean for learners to absorb in my Hebrew Bible courses is that biblical studies grounds its claims in publicly available evidence and explicit lines of reasoning, rather than in private revelation or sectarian dogma. Documentary hypotheses for the composition of the Pentateuch are not "alternative dogmas" to an unassailable sectarian claim that Moses authored the first five books of the Bible. An archaeological conclusion that Jericho had no fortifications during any possible time in which one can posit an emergence of Israel in the land is not an "alternative dogma" to an appeal to tradition that Joshua made the walls to tumble down. In this context, with what sort of cognitive dissonance do I set a learner if I refuse to make transparent my rubrics for assessing his exegesis paper? ("It just feels like a B minus.") If my appeal is to the inscrutable and unquestionable authority of my disciplinary expertise and teaching experience, I signal a very different kind of norms for the community of biblical scholars to that which I have been at pains to illustrate in my course design.

Do my syllabus and other communication documents direct learners toward institutional policies regarding accommodations for medical issues, disabilities, neurodivergence, and so on? An explicit commitment to reasonable accommodation signals a community norm of inclusion. If I want my learners to imagine the community of disciples as one marked by radical inclusion, then the community of inquiry fostered in my online class is the place to start. Do you find that your institutional policies regarding accommodation are difficult to locate, or hard to understand, or implicitly overridden by instructor whim? It may be time to escalate the matter (to a dean of students or academic dean, to a faculty council, even to a student council). Accommodation in the online class is at least as challenging as in the face-to-face class. How does one accommodate "extra time" for a collaborative assignment that begins and ends over the course of a week? Have I crafted my course documents (syllabus, assignment instructions, feedback) such that they are legible to a "reading" computer program used by a cognitively or visually impaired learner (or my audio-visual resources for the hearing-impaired learner)?

It's a tough standard by which to evaluate my online course design, but one that takes seriously the facts that 1) I explicitly describe to learners the ideals of the disciplinary community in which my class seeks to form them, and 2) my course design is forming them into some kind of community of inquiry with its own values . . . intended or not, planned or accidental.

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