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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching in the Time of Coronavirus

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We live in a world that tries to manage risk, to assess whether this decision or that decision is more or less risky, better or worse for the long term good of the institution, more or less likely to lead to student complaints, and more. And we make plans to mitigate risks based on knowledge and experience. Then, the crisis we are not prepared for appears. And if the crisis occurs in the midst of a semester, teachers rightly find themselves asking, what does it look like to teach in the midst of a crisis?

There is no "one size fits all" response in the midst of a crisis. Each school is different. Teachers are different. Students respond in their own ways. Some classes are small, some large, some medium. Some students and teachers have lots of experience online and others none. In addition, there are a variety of emotions that may be present such as fear, anxiety, lethargy, depression, panic, and worry to name a few. It is important for teachers to recognize that *both* the teacher and the student/s may be experiencing challenging emotions that they have to navigate while functioning in an upended life situation. Our awareness of these situations can help us as we think about teaching strategies during a crisis situation. These strategies are familiar.

First, invite the whole self to be present in the classroom. When my institution moved to the

fully online environment, I set up a forum for each class and invited students to “check-in” with both myself and fellow students. They were invited to share how they were doing, how they were feeling, and how they had been impacted by the coronavirus crisis. I gave a little credit for completing the forum to show students that I really wanted to hear from them. I also shared some of my own concerns with them so they could see that I was also impacted by this crisis. I plan to continue this “check-in” strategy over the weeks ahead since the impacts of the crisis will be felt for months to come. There is no use denying the presence of such a crisis.

Second, communicate clearly. In the first week that we were online, I sent out several announcements sharing information as it was made known to me. For example, I let the class know it had shifted from face-to-face to online and indicated when I would send out more information. Two days later I emailed them with the class outline for the week and clear instructions about how to access and complete that week’s class. On our normal class meeting day, I reminded them that my TA and I would be available via Zoom for an optional session where they could chat or ask questions.

Third, change assignments to fit the crisis. For example, in a class on the book of Acts I asked students to analyze the speeches in the book of Acts in small zoom groups and then talk about the message the scattered disciples took with them as they left Jerusalem. I then asked them to think about what message they wanted to take with them as they had been scattered from the seminary to their homes. And, I asked them to think about how they would communicate this message in the time of social distancing. In a different class, I changed a requirement for service hours to an opportunity to write on the early church’s response to plague and connect that writing with our own situation.

Finally, aim for an encouraging, empathetic tone. Creating a tone that encourages both students and teachers, reminding us of both frailty and hope, and calling us to our best selves will strengthen the community of the course. Allowing many to reach out and uphold each other in the midst of challenging times means the burden is not on just one person (usually the teacher). In this way, teachers can model for the future leaders we are teaching how to be people who name their emotions/vulnerabilities, recognize the variety of responses people have to crisis, communicate clearly, work to connect the current crisis with current learning, and reach out to support one another.

Which strategies are you using to teach during the time of coronavirus?

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