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Teaching in Crisis - Lessons from Teaching in Prison

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Last summer, I packed up our house, defended my dissertation, and moved to the greater New York area to begin my first tenure-track teaching position. There was nothing in new faculty orientation about teaching in a pandemic. However, I find myself drawing from my doctoral experience researching and directing a theological education program in prison as a very present help in this moment of crisis. Here is why.

Teaching in prison is to teach
in frequent states of crisis and disruption.

It was not uncommon to hear of violent assaults or deeply unsettling “shake downs” that left the community enraged. Both of these and worse happened- and more than once. Crisis and disruption were more the norm than moments of structure and peace.

I learned during those times that
the most essential thing to do was to show up for class.

“Showing up” is a pedagogical practice of “being with and for others” in times of crisis. In prison, that meant physically working our way through security checkpoints, gates, and locked doors so we could open physical and metaphorical doors for others. The journey to class was often filled with so many obstacles that it left us all physically and mentally exhausted. But there was an unexplainable source of energy (grace) that came when we all showed up. Showing up was how we, teachers and learners, held together a physical place where those

who wanted to gather, could gather.

In those times, I learned that
showing up in crisis risks encountering human emotion.

In crisis, the classroom can become a place where lament and laughter co-exist, weaving in and out of one another in ways impossible to control but necessary for survival. The classroom can be a space where rage gives rise to revelation ... or not. I learned that emotions are an essential and expected part of processing crisis and my role as an educator is not to be a therapist or a counselor, but to bear witness. To bear witness in crisis is to be present to the confusing and unpredictable shifts between joy and anger, between light-hearted relief and soul-crushing fear, between wanting to lament and wanting to get on with the lesson of the day. This experience bearing witness to uncomfortable moments of pain, despair, sadness, and rage has, in many ways, prepared me for the present.

When my University shifted to remote learning, there was the familiar question of whether or not to have class. The overwhelming response of students was yes. Showing up, even virtually, allowed us to maintain a sense of community and to be present to and with one another as gift, a balm. Students wanted a place where they could gather, listen, and be heard. I knew from my prison teaching experience that to hold a place where people could be heard in crisis was to risk exposing human emotion—and I was okay with that.

As a curator of classroom experiences, I often begin with communal hearing sessions or check-ins. Sometimes I do this as a large group, sometimes in smaller breakouts. Hearing from one another does not normally take an entire class session. There were many times in the prison where I simply asked students to share one word describing how they felt as they entered class that day. At the end of class, we closed with a one-word hope for the week ahead. The ritual of hearing from one another allowed us to gauge whether we needed more time checking-in or whether we moved on to the lesson for the day.

As our time in crisis extends, I find myself varying the prompts I use for communal hearing, embracing different forms of poetry, guided meditation, and music--sometimes using silence. Recently, I asked a Zoom class to sit in silence for five minutes while reflecting on an unexpected source of hope or joy from the week prior. I closed the time with a short, one-sentence prayer. Testimony, art, silence—all mediums for processing emotion, bearing witness, hearing one another, and for showing up. All mediums I grew comfortable using while teaching in prison.

As a graduate student, I did not know then how much teaching in prison was radically shaping my openness to and ability to teach in moments of uncertainty and disruption. I suspect teaching in this crisis will have a similar life-altering effect.

How do you hope teaching in this crisis
will radically shape your teaching for years to come?

<https://wabash.center/2020/05/teaching-in-crisis-lessons-from-teaching-in-prison/>