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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Curating and Critical Thinking

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Discussion forums in online classrooms are unfortunately named. The name evokes just talking about stuff. This can be a good use of the discussion forum; dialogue is an important part of higher education. The opportunity to test and develop ideas in conversation with trusted colleagues, both classmates and professors—yes, the discussion forum is a place to do that. But, I find I often get into a rut in these forums. I introduce and assign readings, then ask a series of questions to jumpstart a conversation. At its worst, this is about making sure that students are doing the reading and making some sense of it, a kind of accountability busy work. At its best, this is a way to integrate and work critically together with those materials in ways that help them come alive and become true conversation partners for the developing wisdom of my students.

I am always looking for other ways to better use these dialogical spaces with students. One of the metaphors that has been helpful for me is to use these spaces for students to “curate” materials for one another. By “curate,” I mean something like this: “to collect, select and present information or items such as pictures, video, music, etc. for people to use or enjoy, using your professional or expert knowledge.” For example, wise curating is what Maria

Popova does in her excellent podcast and website, “Brain Pickings” (<https://www.brainpickings.org/>).

Curating in discussion forums can take all sorts of forms, depending on your purposes and the disciplined knowledges you are attempting to teach. Here are some of the ways I have used it as a religious educator and practical theologian:

- • **Curating Examples from Daily Life:** When I am reading dense theoretical pieces with students (imagine Pierre Bourdieu or Paulo Freire), I invite them to find a website, image, or current event that illustrates one of the key theoretical concepts in the reading. This brings about a great deal of reflection on the concepts as the students try to imagine what might serve as a useful example of the concept in action. They often consider and reject many concepts as they try to find the one they will share, thus generating a more careful review of the reading. They post a link to the event or website and explain the concept that they see it illustrating to their colleagues. This has the subtle effect of helping them imagine that engaging these theories is not to demonstrate their competence for a grade, but to gain tools to better understand how the world works. It also serves as a test for the theories as we begin to see which ones have heuristic value making sense of daily life.
- • **Curating Images:** When we are working in my practical theology class on forming theological questions grounded in human experience, I invite students to offer a photographic image from their home or neighborhood that raises significant theological questions for them. As the collection of images are curated, they begin to see how questions are related to particular contexts and communities, as well as begin to think about what makes a question theological at all. Their colleagues’ reflections on their images generate a range of different theological questions and demonstrate the role of perspectival framing not just in the answering of questions, but also in their initial framing.
- • **Curating Practices:** In a religious education class I ask students to search the web for examples of contemporary religious educational practice happening inside or outside of communities of faith. They share the examples and analyze them, naming their strengths and limitations and how they might imagine using them in their own practice as educators. This not only gives them practice in identifying and analyzing resources, but also expands all of our knowledge about what is currently happening in the practice of the field and how it relates to the academic texts we have been reading.
- • **Curating Stereotypes, or Common Misunderstandings and Misrepresentations:** In youth ministry classes, I have students curate examples of the ways that adolescents are stereotyped and used as tropes in popular culture. They then take apart those stereotypes and tropes and compare them to what we’ve gleaned from developmental, sociological, and cultural studies of adolescence we have been reading. This enables them to identify where the tropes may have roots in those theories, but also where they have become distorted.

Curating would serve different purposes in different disciplines, and I am sure you have

creative ideas here. Students might curate examples of a particular Biblical text or historical event in visual art, poetry, literature, or song and talk about the interpretive choices made in that artwork. They might collect examples of practices from religious traditions in popular culture, or on YouTube, and analyze how they are represented in those forums in relation to the academic interpretations you are reading about those same practices. They might curate helpful video lectures or social media posts of an author you are reading, giving them a chance to listen to their embodied voices and discover something of the human behind the academic work you are reading. They might find examples of how historical events that you are studying are depicted on websites intended for elementary or middle schoolers and talk about the implications of historiographical choices made in those settings. They might curate academic articles that build on the theory you are reading in an area that is relevant to their own vocational path.

The beautiful thing about online discussion forums is that curating, posting a photo or link, and then writing a brief analysis of the artifact, is very easy to construct. It leverages the investigative power of the students and allows them to follow their interests, integrate knowledge, engage in application and analysis, and discover connection between the subject matter and the broader world in which they live.

<https://wabash.center/2020/04/curating-and-critical-thinking/>