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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Processing a Curriculum of Pandemic Through Intentional Learning Community

Tracey Lamont, *Loyola University*

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I, like so many, have been flooded with a mixture of emotions during this pandemic and self-isolation. While feelings of fear and anxiety often overcome me, I also have a profound sense of gratitude. I am privileged to be able to take a step back and ask religious questions those deep questions of meaning and value—with fellow religious educators. It is from phone conversations in isolation that Dr. Kathleen O’Gorman and I came to wonder what is this emergent curriculum, or “curriculum of pandemic,” that has descended upon us all, teaching us? What might we learn and how we are we called to respond in meaningful, educative ways?

The first place Kathleen and I thought to process this emergent curriculum was with our learning community, to learn from this pandemic *with* our students and alums. We invited a small group of about 10 people, all of whom were enthusiastic about this gathering, into a process of introspection and learning. It was apparent from our initial correspondence leading up to and during our first session that we all want to feel connected in some way right now.

This affirmed for me the need not just for community, but to create an intentional learning community. I -we- longed for a “community of conversation”—to connect and make meaning together. For me, the calling to teach means both teaching and learning and this pandemic called my colleague and I to be more intentional about our praxis as teachers and learners *together*.

Kathleen coined the title for our virtual sessions “Pandemic Pandemonium.”

There is no script or textbook that tells us what we can learn and how we should respond to this global crisis; therefore, we developed a framework of four sessions from which will flow a process of unpacking this curriculum of pandemic. Drawing inspiration from Kathleen’s gifts of music and aesthetics, we framed each one around a different song to evoke our affective sensibilities.

In our first session, we set the context for our process of teaching and learning through the pandemic by listening to Sam Cooke sing “A Change Is Gonna Come” set to a video with still images of people standing up for their human rights across the world throughout different moments in history. In sharing our interpretations and insights from this video and song, we discussed how we might connect these historical movements for change to the change emerging before us right now.

What change do we want to see from this experience of sheltering in place, from teaching in learning through new modes and mediums, and from recognition the earth is healing itself while we remain still? We concluded that first session by observing how each movement for change in society was a movement towards deeper inclusion. How, then, is this curriculum of pandemic guiding us towards greater inclusivity?

This set the tone for our next session, “Go to your room” (something Mother Earth seems to be telling us right now), and the introspection on our feelings and emotions as we withdraw from everyday life. Following John Lennon’s song, “Isolation,” we invited our group to start thinking about how this time away has opened new patterns of living. How have our feelings given rise to new ways of thinking and experiencing the world and how might we help others (those we serve, family, friends) discern the meaning and value of isolation as we are experiencing it?

Our third session will reimagine how we “Come Together” (using the Beatles cover song by Gary Clark Jr.), by asking: What now? What is the meaning of all this? What are we learning from gathering in new ways and how does that inform and transform our praxis as religious educators; how does this change in patterns of living call us to rethink our curriculum and praxis towards greater inclusivity?

In our final session, we curated a curriculum of closure to be the start of a new beginning. With help from The Beatles again, “Let it Be,” we reflect the meaning of Sabbath during this time as we ask what is Mother Earth telling us? How are we called by Mother Earth to *Let it Be*? We end our session with a pastoral plan informed by what we learned and how we are called to respond.

I hope to return to these reflections as our process unfolds in the coming weeks. In the meantime, I am sharing this experience in developing a process curriculum to invite others, if you have not already begun to do so, to engage in a process of introspection and discernment with your learning community to uncover how your teaching and learning can respond to a curriculum of pandemic.

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