



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Educational Design: When Tweaking the System Just Won't Do

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Unprecedented, novel, first-time - these are accurate descriptors of the pandemic. This harsh and slowly unfolding, global crisis has triggered: national and international quarantine; all of education simultaneously moving online; re-established family routines to include homeschooling and working from home - sometimes on the same dining room table; elders separated and feeling abandoned in care facilities; rebooted work lives to exclude travel and mercilessly increased digital meetings; recalibrated sense of security to include the uncertainty of not knowing when the "all clear" will be sounded.

The imaginary parent manual does not include home schooling for all the children at a moment's notice. There is no section in the faculty handbook for when students go-missing during crisis pedagogy. There is no research which proves the brain atrophies with each minute of Zoom conferencing. What do leaders do when there is no experience to draw upon? What do we do when we are faced with a challenge never before faced? If, as they say, "experience is the best teacher" - what does one do in this unprecedented societal upheaval?

Like most young people, I had little patience when my parents referenced their experiences for my learning. My impatience increased when their recollected stories were utilized as a warning or to point out about my shortcomings. I had little interest in conversations which

started with, “when I was a child...” or “back in my day...” Now, I, at the tender age of mid-to-late 50’s, have an appreciation for my parent’s wisdom teachings because I now realize the value of learning from and mining previous experiences. However, this pandemic, in a digital age, is most certainly without precedent. My hunch is that drawing too deeply upon the faux simile of past experience will not equip us to grapple with the current upheaval or the too slowly coming future.

By now, we all have participated in conversations comparing this historic moment to 9/11 or comparing this to NYC in the HIV epidemic or comparing this pandemic to the pandemic of 1918 or comparing this moment to the many episodes of “the plague” throughout history. While we can draw comparisons, we already know this is not any of those events. This is significantly different. Those comparisons seem not big enough, not violent enough, of too small a scope or not close enough to home. As we search for previous experience from which to extrapolate for this moment, we come up short. What do you do when you have never had to do for such a time as this?

The first impulse is to do do something, do anything that provides a flurry of activity that looks like you are in charge, knowledgeable, and making a difference. Leaders begin to organize and strategize in categories such as immediate plans, intermediate plans, and long-range plans. I know I did. The uniqueness of this exhausting pandemic is that it is still unfolding, it is still unfurling. We cannot see around the corner. We cannot see over the hill into the intermediate or into the long term. The first impulse “to do” makes sense, but it is feeble and lacks deep consideration for the current reality. The danger will not pass until a vaccine is made and widely distributed or until a cocktail of medications is approved. What do you do when you cannot, realistically, plan?

Perhaps, in unprecedented situations, the better doing of leaders is to pause; not an idle pause, but the kind of pause to rethink, reconceive, reengineer based upon the ever-changing crisis.

We tend to think of waiting as being idle or complacent. In this case, I am suggesting taking time to in waiting as time of watching, observing, rethinking, dreaming. Waiting, in unprecedented times, might mean watching the changes, observing the signs, listening both inside and outside of yourself and of your community. Waiting as imagining the next steps, fantasizing possibilities, even when it is not clear what is possible. Moving into a mode of waiting is a recognition that adaptation, contingency, or revision will not work for the long haul in this unprecedented time. Waiting, pausing, listening might mean the recognition that what is needed to move forward is new design, newfangled ways, and innovative teaching models.

Several deans and presidents are making a three-pronged plan for the fall semester. First, they plan to, as soon as possible, get back to business as usual – face to face education in the fall. Then, if there is a second wave of COVID 19, they plan to move the teaching to online for a prescribed period of time with plans to return to face to face before semester’s end. Third, if the virus wave lasts a long time, they will move the teaching to online for an extended period of time or through the end of the semester. The challenge of the three-pronged plan is that

most institutions do not have the where-with-all for such nimbleness. Staffing and teaching, while attempting to pivot between a three-pronged plan, is beyond the institutional capacity of most schools. And, we have learned that moving from face-to-face syllabi to online teaching results in crisis pedagogy and not thoughtful, quality, online pedagogy. A three-pronged contingency plan would need three syllabi.

The strategies I hear good administrators planning are simply too simple to meet the complex and vexing times we suddenly are hit by. This strategy will be like a band aid for a gaping wound. It is speculated that viral waves will be active in the future. It is suspected, just like the flu and cold season we are accustomed to, this highly fatal strain of virus will mutate and join the cycle of flu and cold seasons. Based upon this speculation, it would behoove us not to modify education as if the virus will someday go away. We have to design new educational models as if the virus, in some form, is now part of our educational universe. The virus is now our new normal.

Rather than responding by tweaking education, suppose we spend this time redesigning education?

Most of us are not trained in educational design. The best educational leaders are rarely proficient at navigating ambiguity or guiding faculties, staff, trustees and institutions when we cannot see around corners or over the crest of the hill. The institutions who have made the most radical changes have been due to financial distress. I suspect schools who are financially sound will also need to redesign.

The redesign of education might actually be over due and only exacerbated by COVID 19 pandemic. The uncertainty of this moment, if we pause and stop tweaking, can be a time to take stock of the larger uncertainty in our society which affects education. The pandemic has divulged the complexity of societal problems which must be considered if education is to be redesigned.

The social complexities which affect education are many and quite dense. Technology is ever changing. The volatility of stock markets and international economic trends are difficult to predict. The groaning of climate change, the strained health care system, the rise in white supremacy, basic democratic practices are stymied by voter suppression and widespread corruption. Student loan debt is crippling. The denominational church has shattered. The industrial prison complex has destroyed countless families. Homelessness and poverty are at an all-time high. Without giving way to nihilism, there is a pervasive, looming and lingering feeling that almost nothing is certain and the tectonic plates of society are rocking and rolling. There are no quick fixes for a new design of education. There is no one answer for this challenge and no one leader to this moment. Redesigning education will need our best minds, our best imagineers, our best teams of collaborators.

The Wabash Center, in conversation with colleagues, has begun to think about ways we can support colleagues as we grapple with redesigning theological and religious education. What is possible? What new communal epistemologies will guide us? Who, beyond conventional

educational arenas, will we invite into the collaboration? What will it mean to deepen and broaden our digital imaginations? What if the work of education is, as bell hooks has said, to teach transgression? What will the newly reconceived education look it, smell like, taste like, feel like, sound like, be like?

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