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Providing a Stabilizing Scaffold for Students while Teaching about Justice during Unjust and Uncertain Times

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In striving to craft a trauma-informed pedagogy while teaching about social justice, my reflections have often circled around a central question: When is it appropriate to use tragic and traumatic current events as examples of injustice in the classroom? I've been pondering this question for the last few years, while teaching undergraduate courses at a predominately White, Catholic institute. The majority of students take my classes to fulfill a General Education requirement. Most students are from Christian denominations at varying levels of personal faith commitments, and few might elect to take a theology class if it was not required.

On the one hand, making connections between course content and the world in which students live is effective. Tethering discussion to an event that every person in the classroom knows about (e.g., the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021) is an attention-grabber. When a well-known event, like the Atlanta spa shootings, affects a particular community more significantly than others—in this case, the AAPI community—discussing it in class signals to students that I take the trauma seriously and care about how they've been impacted by it. It can also be time during which my White-identifying students—especially those from predominately White communities—may be more open to learn a much-needed lesson about the reality of White supremacy and White privilege.

On the other hand, I worry about retraumatizing students from communities affected by the event. I'll never forget how a few years ago, after a 2-week unit on racism in my theology and social justice course, a Black male student told me: "I have to think about racism almost every minute in my life. I always have a target on my back. I drive to school with my wallet on the dashboard, just in case I get pulled over. When I get to your classroom, I want a break. I just want to talk about Jesus." This student did not need me to cater to White students, in trying to convince them that Black lives really do matter. And it clearly added to his trauma when I did.

This question of how often to bring traumatic current events into the classroom came to a head while I was teaching about theology and justice this spring, in an undergraduate class entitled "Just Theology." My class is constructed around several modules, each analyzing a theme of injustice prevalent in US society, through a theological lens. Modules center around topics like poverty, war and weapons, global warming, sexism and patriarchy, racism, immigration, and homophobia and transphobia. My students were predominately White (around 10 to 15 percent BIPOC-identifying) and fairly gender balanced. In my 24-student undergraduate classes usually no more than one student (if that) openly identifies as trans or non-binary. In some classes, I've had up to 30 percent disclose to me in written work that they identify as LGBTQ+, but not all are open on campus.

This last semester (Spring 2021), I had no shortage of options for bringing current events into our classroom discussions. But I was also deeply aware of how my students were living in a permanent state of instability and uncertainty, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Capitol attack, the US-Mexico border crisis, ongoing police brutality and murders, record high unemployment rates, and frequent mass shootings. Introducing students to disorienting dilemmas with conflicting theories and positions, as I usually tried to do in other semesters, almost seemed insensitive in a context already so unstable and polarized over these same issues.

After chatting with some colleagues about this struggle, I came to articulate and adopt a pedagogical principle: discussing traumatic events in the classroom, in such an unstable time, necessitates a stabilizing scaffold to frame the events, that is, a theory or intellectual framework that is responsible to course content and objectives.[1]

Remembering my former student's words about wanting to "just talk about Jesus" in my class, I decided to include in my syllabus a piece by Kelly Brown Douglas which makes connections between the stand-your-ground murder of Trayvon Martin and the crucifying murder of Jesus.[2]

Of course, in requiring reading like this, appropriate trigger warnings and alternative assignments need to be offered to students, especially during traumatic times. But the reading assignment seemed to help several students connect my class to the world around them in a personal way. By reading, discussing, and writing about Douglas's connection between Jesus and Trayvon, most of my White students, who needed to, gained some awareness of White supremacy and White privilege. Some of my students of color commented on how they had

never been introduced to a liberating reading of Jesus and appreciated this one that connected deeply to their current everyday struggles. The piece provided nearly all of the students a concept to evaluate—a stabilizing intellectual scaffold around which to consider disorienting and nonsensical tragedies and traumas.

Teaching through 2020 and 2021 has been difficult, to be sure, but my students helped me to see how many of them necessitate and yearn for critical thought even more during times of tragedy, uncertainty, and trauma.

[1] I am particularly grateful to my colleague and conversation partner, Dr. Kristi Law, Director of the Bachelor of Social Work program and Associate Professor at St. Ambrose University, for helping me think through this idea.

[2] Kelly Brown Douglas, “Jesus and Trayvon: The Justice of God,” in *Stand your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 171-203.

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