



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Respecting the Learner's Time: Getting to Know Me

G. Brooke Lester, *Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

January 12, 2022

Tags: student learning | teaching bible | big ideas | essential questions

You know who has a lot of spare time lately? Nobody. You know something that wastes time when you're a student? Finding yourself in a class that is definitely not a class you want, because no one gave you a heads-up about Dr. Lester. Someone should give them that heads-up, and it should be me. How better to do so than by telling them all of my dearest hopes and dreams... before they sign on the enrollment line.

Just because a student wants to take Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, it doesn't mean they want to take it from me. Better to figure that out before week one, rather than week five or six... agreed? I listen to our admissions director and to our dean of students, and the word I hear over and over is "precarity." The lives of our students are more precarious than ever. (Yes, so are yours and mine, but let's keep our focus on the students.) On the first day of the term, a student likely comes into my class with no wiggle room in their life. If my approach is not what they're after, then this relationship is costing them money and more than that, it's wasting their time.

See, I don't just have a lot of knowledge about the Hebrew Bible and its study; I also have all these *ideas* about them. And not just ideas—I have feelings, and passions, and convictions, and reckonings. Many of these are commensurable with those of other instructors at my institution and its partners in cross-registration, but they are not identical. Professor So-and-So and I may agree broadly about the subject matter and its study; we may devour each other's research about it and may laugh at each other's jokes about it; we're *sympatico*... and a student might find heaven in their course and hell in mine.

To put it in terms of course design, I have “big ideas” that animate my course and its units. (For what follows, see Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, Pearson, 2006.) These big ideas are one major source for the understanding, knowledge, and skills that I hope learners will develop in their engagement with the Hebrew Bible. Wiggins and McTighe describe a big idea as a linchpin, and as “conceptual Velcro”: a big idea unifies several pieces of “related content knowledge” in a way that is core to understanding the subject at hand. For example, here are some of the big ideas that animate the units in my Introduction to the Hebrew Bible:

- *Cross-Culture*: reading the Bible is always a cross-cultural experience.
- *Competing Claims*: biblical texts will disagree with one another about God, God’s ways with the world, and what God wants.
- *Not You*: biblical texts are not talking to you—they speak to their own time and place, in order to make specific things happen in their circumstances.
- *History is Storytelling*: histories, like any stories, use strategies for reasons: characterization, plot, point-of-view, omission, misdirection, rhetoric of every kind.
- *The Story is not the History*: the “world behind the text” is not the “world in the text.”

In *Understanding by Design* terms, these big ideas correspond to “essential questions” that do not call for a single knowable answer, but rather prompt further questions and open-ended inquiry: Can competing claims about God both be true? What makes a claim true? What does it mean for a text to “speak to” a hearer whom the text never imagined? To what is a history accountable? What makes a cross-cultural experience “authentic”?

You start to get an idea, don’t you? These overlapping big ideas and essential questions motivate the course design... and, not incidentally, tell you a lot about me and what it might be like to spend thirteen weeks doing my assignments and adapting to my feedback.

If this isn’t what a learner expects of an Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, they can ask themselves some questions. Are they surprised and delighted? Are they cautiously curious but wonder what other offerings of this course might look like (at my institution or elsewhere)? Are they repulsed or offended? Would they like to chat? However this goes, we are well on our way toward a week one roster of forewarned, well-informed, consenting participants. But *only* if this information is available in a timely way, and that means the day that registration opens. Any lesser commitment means a waste of time for prospective learners who don’t have it in the bank.

<https://wabash.center/2022/01/respecting-the-learners-time-getting-to-know-me/>