



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Diversity Complicates Our Seeing

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse
January 31, 2022

Author's Note: My use of the word "diversity" is with reluctance. It is an overused and often misunderstood word. In this case, by diversity I mean difference. I am concerned with the difference that is revealed in our body sizes, shapes, shades, smells, tastes and sounds. Diversity exists between cultures when minoritized peoples are compared to the status quo, or when white, western, male, straight culture is normalized as superior. By diversity I mean to imply the innovation that is needed to meet the needs of classrooms when curriculum, rather than ignoring minoritized students, shifts to include, accommodate, incorporate and value new meaning making, new knowledges and new ways of being together. Where there is diversity there is likely conflict. Diversity, whether by institutional intent or by happenstance, complicates our ability to see students.

Peekaboo! I see you!

Infants and parents all over the world play some version of this game. In view of the infant, the adult hides their face, pops back into view of the infant, then says *Peekaboo! ... I see you!* This game, full of surprise and expectation, results in the infant's squeals of delight and amazement. For infant and parent, being seen is joyful. Like in the peekaboo game, teachers

understand the value and joy of conveying to our students that “I see you.” It is important that each student in our classrooms have the experience of being acknowledged and welcomed. Each soul wants to be seen.

With comparatively little effort on the teacher’s part, students with similar aspirations, similar race, similar culture, and similar economic class, easily find their place in the classroom tableau. It is less complicated to teach a course whose student population is homogenous than it is to teach in diversity. In sameness, the assumptions, the presumptions, the conventions, the ascribed values and the norms function without need for explanation, or clarity and typically without threat of contestation. “Everybody knows ...” is the working premise - and rightfully so.

In the diverse classroom, “everybody knows...” falls short because now every body is not the presumed same body. In diversity, the bodies vary, the knowledges and know-hows vary. Differing bodies bring different music, clothing, hairstyles, lifestyles, languages, value patterns, religions, foods, history, and family situations. That which could be presumed as being normative can no longer be presumed and often demand a stretching of our thinking, being, understanding and doing.

Our language, social labeling, and identity politics bares out our societal patterns of inclusion and exclusion. “In this country American is white. Everybody else has to hyphenate,” said Toni Morrison. When our white classrooms shift to include hyphenated persons, we are unprepared. Those students who, with their very presence, create diversity are often the students who go unseen and who are rendered un-seeable.

Regrettably and commonly, seeing minoritized students means policing them. The surveilling gaze, the suspicious stare, the apprehensive look, or the disapproving glance lets him/her/they know of the hostility and the relegation to being as a stranger. Or worse yet, students who create diversity in the school’s population are erased, made invisible, removed completely from the sighted reality of the teacher. These students are ghosted - absented in classrooms. Their differences are not recognizable as adequate. Differences do not mean deficiencies.

As teachers, we choose which students we will see and which students we will disregard, look past, or look away from. This is a challenging realization. It is dis-ingenuine for any teacher to say that he/she/they pay attention to all students, that they are able to see all students, that they are attentive to all students. Even the most caring teacher has students for which giving their attention is a strain. We all have biases, prejudices, and cultural insensitivities. This does not make any teacher a bad teacher. It does make us human beings who must learn to stretch beyond our prejudices, shallow cultural boundaries, and narrow sensibilities.

Homo sapiens. “(Wo)Man who knows.” Or rather, “human who is conscious.” Human who is conscious that he/she/they does not know. We are our most human when we make choices, when we exercise the power of choice. Teaching is a testing ground, and learning place, for our own humanity. In teaching relationships, we succeed, or we fail miserably, by choosing to see some students and refusing to see others. It is this choice that makes us human and this choice that makes us good, bad, or growing teachers. In our humanness we are both

vulnerable and afraid. The challenge is to muster the courage to see all the students – those like us and those so different from us that we shrink back and recoil. As courageous teachers, we ask:

- What does it mean to teach in such a way that the erased student rematerializes?
- What does it mean to teach in such a way that the invisible-ed student reappears?
- What does it mean to teach in such a way that the unseen or overlooked student comes into focus?
- What does it mean to teach in such a way that the hiding or hidden student peeks out from behind their wall?
- What does it mean to teach in such a way that the voiceless student comes to voice?
- Can we teach in such a way that the learning experience for all would not make sense or would have no meaning if there was an erased student in the conversation?
- What would it mean to teach with such precision that lessons, to be successful, need the input, participation, knowledges, voice, and creativity of all the students?
- What kind of teaching relates to the diversity of students in the classroom without asking that every student normalize or centralize the white, male, straight, wealthy culture?
- What if teaching in diversity is too difficult, too demanding – creates too many problems? Then what?

Still embroiled in the global pandemic, we are teaching online, we are in classrooms donning masks, and we are still reeling with societal uncertainty and fatigue. We, in these COVID riddled years, have a legitimate excuse to not see those who are erased, those invisible-ed, and the hiding students. Even though it is more work, more effort, more stress - now is precisely the time we must find ways to see them, all.

<https://wabash.center/2022/01/diversity-complicates-our-seeing/>