



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Outshine the Naysayers

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

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse
June 01, 2022

In planning a course, have you ever designed a creative learning activity that you thought was marvelous, and then feedback from others substantiated its marvelousness? But then, one or two people, naysayers, gave you a negative critique? And, rather than focusing on the marvelousness, your focus attached to your fear and those scant few negative opinions. You allowed the feeling of the praise to become flimsy, while the feeling of being chastised became more concrete. Along the same lines, have you ever read student course evaluations and the overwhelming majority of the opinions were positive while one opinion found the course lacking, and then your focus was upon the one negative word rather than positive feedback? These examples are quite common. In these moments, we have allowed our good work to be eclipsed by the negative critiques. We surrendered our creativity, allowing negative voices to even drown out the praise of trusted peers and pupils. We allowed ourselves to be disconnect from our own ingenuity.

Too often, we succumb to negative criticism, then decide to curtail our creative choices, rather than lean into the feedback that supports and celebrates our creativity. What would it mean to ignore the negative and, for the sake of effective teaching, pursue that which is imaginative, generative, and wildly untraditional in the classroom? I am glad I mustered this kind of courage.

Here's a story...

In my excitement, I arrived at the building about 7:15 AM. I was meeting the carpenters in the atrium of our seminary building to hang our poster exhibit. Our exhibit entitled, "Basic Concepts of Engaged Pedagogy" was our semester-long aim. My students, with my guidance, had made posters depicting the basic concepts of bell hook's theory of engaged pedagogy. Their work was brilliant! From the first session of the introductory course until week nine when the posters were handed-in, we had been reading, discussing, debating, discovering, analyzing, and understanding Dr. hook's work on teaching as a practice of freedom. In our grappling, we had incorporated Paulo Freire, Anne Streaty Wimberly, and Katie Cannon. Each of the twenty-seven students had created posters depicting the clarity and depth of thought they had gained for hooks' politic of freedom. Our poster exhibit was an expression of their learning as well as a way to teach others about the power of pedagogy to bring liberty.

Three carpenters arrived with ladders and tool boxes. With great care, they laid all the posters on the floor. In creating a cohesive exhibit, the carpenters and I discussed the best locations for each poster to hang. Taking into consideration colors, forms, textures and ease of viewing, we mapped each wall of the atrium. Once the exhibit was mapped on the floor, the carpenters hung each poster. I was very moved by the amount of time and intension the carpenters took in arranging the display. By 9:00 AM the atrium had been transformed into a gallery filled with the concepts of pedagogy as freedom. It was a marvelous gallery exhibit!

All day there was a buzz of excitement in the community about the exhibit. Students, faculty, and friends were very complimentary. Then, around 3:00 that afternoon a staff colleague came into my office. I was sitting at my desk. She began talking as soon as she entered.

Her: The atrium is a shared space and should not be cluttered with one person's course materials.

Me: Cluttered?

Her: I'm just afraid you will mar the wood.

Me: Mar the wood?

Her: I really think that all that busy-ness does not belong in the atrium.

Me: Busy-ness?

Her: I really think the posters should be taken down...

At some point her voice became like those of the Charlie Brown adult voices in Peanuts cartoons. When I noticed that she had stopped talking and was now staring at me, I said flatly, "Thank you for your feedback?" She hesitated before leaving. I suspect she realized I was not going to take the exhibit down, so with that, she turned and left my office.

The next day I was called to the Dean's Office. The Dean asked me how long I had planned to

leave the exhibit up. She said she was asking because she had gotten a complaint. The Dean said that someone was concerned about the exhibit marring the walls. I told her the exhibit would be up for four weeks - until the end of the semester. I also informed the Dean that the carpenters had hung the exhibit. The Dean looked surprised. She said she had been told that I had hung the posters myself. I did not respond. We sat in an awkward silence. Finally, I said, "Have you walked through the exhibit and admired the good work of our students? Their grasp of pedagogical theory is impeccable." As I left her office, the Dean said if she had time, she would take a look at the exhibit.

As you might imagine, I left that office feeling angry, deflated, and insulted. I am recalling this event from the early years of my teaching because my initial reaction was to allow the negative critique to curtail my creative approaches. Even though the students were extremely proud of their work and even though so many people in the seminary community were appreciative of the imaginative project, I considered allowing the nay-sayer to stop me from these kinds of projects.

Deciding to ignore this negative critique was likely one of the best decisions I made as a young teacher.

Now, years later, after having made creativity a hallmark of my teaching, I am full of gratitude that I did not allow the naysayer to eclipse my creativity, my teaching, and the good work of my student's learning.

This summer, as you design your new courses and reconsider old courses, think on the positive, affirming feedback more than the negative. Do not give-in to petty complaints or to controlling, dull complainers. Hear the good feedback for what it is--appreciation, admiration, and encouragement for a job well done. Use this summer to quiet the voices that would make you reticent, hesitant, or fearful. Plan to allow your own ingenuity and creativity to shine bright.

<https://wabash.center/2022/06/outshine-the-naysayers/>