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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Embodied Teaching via Zoom

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Blog Series: Embodied Teaching

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As a toddler, the Grammy-winning musician esperanza spalding heard Yo-Yo Ma play cello on *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* and decided she wanted to play music like that. In an interview, she said it was Ma's "total body activism during the music" that captivated her. A jazz-bassist, vocalist, and composer, esperanza moves with her music, which defies genres, and hopes to create a physical experience of resonance in her audience. As a professor of practice at Harvard, she hosts jam sessions at the studio at Harvard's ArtLab so that participants can improvise and make music together. In her heart, she wants to be someone in "deep co-learning" with her students.

How can our classrooms be spaces of co-learning that welcome creativity, collaboration, and even improvisation? How can we recognize the body as a valuable site of learning, so that the knowledge we gain would not be over our heads, but would speak to and touch our innermost yearning and desires? If this is difficult to do in an in-person classroom, is there any hope for online teaching via Zoom?

Last spring, I taught an online course on Spirituality for the Contemporary World for Master students and community learners. I have learned so much about embodied teaching and learning: guided meditation, listening to music and poetry, art appreciation, rituals, Tai Chi,

cross-cultural discussion, and much more. I want to reflect on a few memorable moments from the class.

I invited Professor Cláudio Carvalhaes to speak on “The Pandemic and the Re-imagination of Rituals” because I knew him to be a creative teacher, preacher, and liturgist. Carvalhaes discussed the relation of ritual to our body and earth. He shared his experiences of leading workshops on liturgies on four continents of the world, which led to the book *Liturgies from Below*. At a time of crisis, he said, it is important to draw from the experiences of the community to craft liturgies and prayers that respond to the people’s needs.



At the end of the presentation, he invited students to offer prayers with the movements of their bodies. He explained what he was going to do and invited students to warm up by standing, shaking loose, moving from side to side, and turning around. He demonstrated how to do these to ease the students. Then he picked up his guitar and sang four stanzas of a song. As he sang the first stanza on happiness and thanksgiving, he invited students to move to embody memories of happiness and joy. Similarly, he sang the second stanza on sadness and the third one on anxiety and invited students to imagine movements to express them. In the final stanza, he closed by asking God to hear our prayers, which were all in our bodies.

During the pandemic, feelings of grief, helplessness, and uncertainty are stored in our bodies, as the book *The Body Keeps the Score* says. Acknowledging these feelings through movements of prayers helped us to connect with these emotions. Doing this together made us feel less alone. Students appreciated the time with Carvalhaes as they were given the freedom to experience the power of ritualizing through their embodied selves in their own ways.

I also invited Episcopal priest and artist the Rev. Susan Taylor to lead a class on spirituality and art. Some years ago, I invited her to speak in my class in person and she brought a lot of art supplies with her. She wanted us to try out and create a collective art project at the end and the process was inspiring. This time, I told her, the class was online and I would appreciate it if she could include doing art in the class. She told me to ask students to have their art supplies, such as painting and drawing mediums, brushes, pieces of paper, color, palette knives, etc., on hand.



She made a presentation on how arts help individuals and churches during a time of pandemic and strengthen our relationship with God. She shared photos of her art and included a detailed explanation of the process of working through a 7'x 6' painting entitled "Skyflowers." Introducing the process of how we would make art together, she offered a lot of encouragement for us to explore and tune out the self-judgmental voice.

On Zoom, we could see her painting in her studio, adding shades and layers of colors to her work. We spent some time creating our own art and afterward we shared our experience of making art and what this meant to us. We also discussed how to include art in our own spiritual life and ministries. The brief moment of creating art transformed us from spectators to participants. It was wonderful to see students trying to express themselves in new ways and hear what art evoked in them.

Since the class met for an hour and a half in the evening, I decided to teach Tai Chi movements for several minutes in the middle of each class. I began by teaching simple Tai Chi exercises so students could understand the principle of balancing Yin and Yang in the movements.



I also posted a video from YouTube so that they could follow the exercises if they wanted to practice more. After we practiced these exercises in several classes, I was able to teach them several Tai Chi movements by breaking down the steps. Even though we practiced only a few minutes in class, a student was motivated to learn further about the practice of Tai Chi.

We easily succumb to Zoom fatigue in online classes when teaching is didactic, usually with a PowerPoint presentation, and students become passive onlookers. But there are many ways to expand the possibilities of sensory experiences, even in a Zoom meeting. esperanza spalding

invites us to think about teaching as embodied adventures. I have been stretched and learned so much from my co-learners.

<https://wabash.center/2022/10/embodied-teaching-via-zoom/>