



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Exercising Professional Agency

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

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse
July 01, 2023

A summer joy is hosting workshop groups on our campus. The visits allow me conversations with participants over breakfast, or chats while visiting the local ice cream shop. A significant concern for our early career colleagues has to do with agency--or the lack thereof.

Colleagues will recount an incident then ask, what to do when pressed upon by senior colleagues or administrators? What to say when overtaxed by committee assignments? What to say upon hire? What to do when bullied by colleagues? What to do when confused or disoriented about institutional protocols? What to say when the culture of the institution is not clearly defined or when the interpretation of the faculty handbook is unclear? WHAT TO DO? WHAT TO SAY? When I hear their stories and feel their anxiety, I encourage them that they need to have agency in their particular situation.

In so many of the conversations with colleagues the best response I can provide to their concern is that they need to develop, nurture, practice and understand agency. Formulaic or recipe-ed advice would be foolish or ill-conceived. Without being part of the context and without having a clear vantage of the situation, I do not know the better/best answer to their contextual question. I do know, that in many of these situations what is needed by the colleague is a gesture of professional agency.

In the world of academia, we must have agency for ourselves and for our own intellectual projects. Some of the conversations have revealed that colleagues are mis-defining or mis-

characterizing agency. Demonstrating professional agency is not:

- asserting unmerited or unjust privilege
- being demanding, aggressive, or mean-spirited
- a gesture showing a lack of humility
- a request to squander institutional resources
- a wheedling of anger
- a stepping beyond rank or role
- being *uppity* and not knowing your place
- a lack of cooperation
- a lack of participation
- an inability to get along
- an admission of not belonging
- an admission of frailty or lack
- a showing of ill-preparedness

Simply put, habits and practices of agency are about knowing what you want and what you need for your own flourishing and for the benefit of your institution, then working toward those needs and wants. Gestures of agency are meant to increase the likelihood of communal respect, dignity, and career success.

Exercising agency is engaging the wherewithal to pursue purposeful action and pursue goals free from the threat of violence, retribution, or retaliation. Acts of agency begin in the hiring process, continue while forging relationships with colleagues, and work to create healthy patterns of communication.

We all need the skills of agency.

Complex organizations have opportunities and challenges for which the exercise of agency is required to make full use of the opportunities and navigate the challenges. All colleges, universities, and seminaries have their own organizational maze of complexity. Learning to read the context, adapt and understand the context requires agency, savvy, and wherewithal to be confident.

It is too easy to give your agency away. Nothing good comes to the employee or the institution when employees give agency away.

Schools who are grappling with issues, habits and practices of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging sometimes falter when non-white colleagues exercise agency for themselves or for their own intellectual projects. BIPOC colleagues, often newly hired faculty in predominantly white institutions, struggle with the fear of retribution. We learn not to exercise agency for fear of being thought ungrateful for the job or being thought unfit for scholarship. We develop a kind of “go-along to get-along” mentality. This collegial stifling is detrimental to the faculty,

administration, and students, alike.

Negotiation is key to exercising agency. Abilities of negotiation takes self-knowledge; demands a professional plan; requires clarity about the role and responsibility you want now and in the future. You must read your context to understand how the institution functions formally and informally. Learning to read your context is as important as learning to have agency.

Yes - there are dangers in some contexts. There are stories of retaliation and punishment for speaking up and for advocating for yourself. If you are working in a climate that would retaliate against an early career colleague for asking for professional development or for requesting support for research--perhaps that is not the post for you. You have options.

When I was a tenure-track scholar, I began to have casual conversations with a senior colleague about the unmet curricular needs of African American students. Together, he and I began to imagine a new project to strengthen the curriculum. Mid-way through our dreaming, I abruptly interrupted our conversation. I said to my colleague that this project could not happen because he and I had no access to funding. He smirked. He assured me that funding would not be an issue. What I did not know at the time was that my colleague had, at a time, been one of the school's deans. He knew the school had several under-tapped, restricted funds, designated for student support. In a few weeks, he and I presented the Dean with a written proposal and accompanying budget. To my surprise and delight, the Dean funded our idea - using funds from restricted accounts. Our project ran for many years.

I am not saying that all schools have under-tapped funds for projects or that deans will fund internal proposals. I am suggesting that new and needed ideas, with the agency of collaborating colleagues, can create projects which will benefit the students and assist with career goals and aspirations.

Learning to exercise agency, negotiate, read the context, and have clarity about professional aspirations and plans takes time and intention. In this case - experience is the best teacher. It also takes assistance from trusted colleagues.

Consider creating an outline or map that shows your planned road to tenure, promotion, or contract renewal. Include in your map or outline those activities, accomplishments, work products and items in your portfolio which are required for your advancement. Add a timeline to your map. Decide if there are points of negotiation that would benefit you or the institution. Reflect upon and strategize about ways of strengthening the many aspects of your work, then ask what kind of agency is needed to fulfill that plan. Consider showing a colleague your map and talk about what is possible, in your context, to reinforce your work efforts. There are likely opportunities for which you are uninformed. Negotiate for what is needed to fulfill your plan. Do not be deterred or dissuaded if some negotiations do not reap what you request. Keep negotiating for what you need to become the scholar/teacher you aspire to be.

<https://wabash.center/2023/07/exercising-professional-agency/>