



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Writing: A Helpful Tool for the Art of Teaching

Ella Johnson, *Saint Ambrose University*

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Going to the local art supply store was something one of my cousins and I used to love to do as kids. I remember how she used to walk up and down every aisle looking carefully at all the different kinds of paints, brushes, and pencils. I could almost see her thinking about how she would use each one to improve her next project.

While I liked going to the store, I never really used to think of myself as an artist. But I do now. I view teaching as an art. It involves carefully designing syllabi, assignments, classroom activities, and more. And I love to shop for new tools to improve this craft.

I remember acquiring a simple but extremely helpful tool about ten years ago, during a Wabash Center Workshop for Pre-Tenure Theology Faculty. A member of the leadership team, Rolf Jacobson, encouraged us to read at least two books on teaching each year. Since then, I've adopted this advice as discipline. If I haven't read my two books by the end of the academic year, I read them during the summer. I've found that reading about teaching not only keeps me up-to-date in the field, but it often prompts me to revise my syllabi or classroom assignments, which, at the very least, reenergizes my classroom presence and practice.

I've also picked up another helpful tool from Wabash—probably the most useful one I've found to date: writing about teaching. I began this practice on a regular basis when I was first asked to contribute to a Wabash blog series back in 2014. I was given a schedule of deadlines for my

contributions (around five over the period of a year or two). I found that the schedule encouraged a helpful rhythm for me throughout the academic year. Every few months I had to set aside some time to really reflect on my teaching and articulate it to others.

I have the benefit of working in a department in which all of the faculty members are both collegial and dedicated to teaching. While we often chat about classroom experiences and things that either work or don't work in our classes, these conversations are usually brief because we are all just so busy. Setting aside the time to write about my teaching, whether for a blog or in a journal, gives me extra space for processing and reflection. Sometimes this extra space is a necessity. Like the time when I fell down on the first day of class (!), or during the last several years when teaching during multiple pandemics and traumatic current events. In these instances, writing about teaching has helped me to discover, articulate, and distill lessons about myself as a pedagogue and ways to facilitate more engaged learning for students.

Other times, I've found that writing about teaching has elicited valuable advice and feedback from others. Several years ago I reflected on whether or not it is helpful to display emotions in the classroom while talking about difficult topics like racism. I now understand that, as a white teacher, I was not seeing my own privilege in even asking the question. Comments and feedback on this blog helped me to grow. Receiving viewpoints different from my own allow this to happen. As is the case with research articles and manuscripts, writing and publishing about teaching puts my work out there for others to see. While this sometimes feels vulnerable, the critiques I receive often help me to come to a fuller, more accurate view of the topic or what I could be doing better.

In other cases, I write about teaching because something beautiful happened! This happens when I see a "light-bulb" click on for one of my students, or when a classroom conversation takes on a life of its own and results in a moment of organic learning. Sometimes I see the Spirit move in unexpected ways in the classroom or I find that an assignment I designed worked well. Sometimes all of these things happen at the same time. These are moments of beauty. I write about them and read about how other teachers have experienced them in their own classrooms, so we can all appreciate the beauty.

Like when my cousin uses a good paintbrush, I use writing about teaching to ultimately enhance the beauty of my craft.

<https://wabash.center/2023/12/writing-a-helpful-tool-for-the-art-of-teaching/>