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Voices in the Crowd: Helping Students Speak Up in Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

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Teaching Introduction to the Hebrew Bible is one of the most challenging—and enjoyable—parts of my job. It shares some of its challenges with any other large humanities class: how to keep students engaged, reading closely, and asking sophisticated questions while they sit in a sea of their peers.

Other challenges are particular to this course. I jokingly tell colleagues that I teach one of the only Gen Ed topics—the Bible—that students know everything about before entering the classroom. Which is another way of saying that it can be difficult to tap into students' curiosity about a text they may know about intimately from other places. To be curious about a text is to be vulnerable to new ways of thinking about it and not everyone who walks into my classroom feels ready to be open in that way. Thus, while I assume that every student actually *does* have questions about the Bible, some are primed to offer only answers instead of queries about this text. This resistance may be due to the ideological heterogeneity of their peers, to the fact that my authority to teach derives from academic, not religious, credentials, or some other reason entirely. In any case, the large, nondevotional site that is the public university lecture hall can be a difficult context not only for students to *stay* engaged but also to unleash their curiosity about the Bible in the first place.

The practice of Designated Respondents (DR), which I now use every semester I teach this

120-student course, does not resolve all of these difficulties. It does, however, generate conditions in which to address them by creating a framework for consistent engagement, inquiry, and connection.

Practice

Designated Respondents works in some ways like a sustained and structured “fishbowl.” Here is how I introduce students to it in the syllabus:

Three times during this class you will be asked to serve as the “Designated Respondent” for a class meeting. This means that you will come to class more prepared than usual. I will look to you first to actively participate, respond to and pose your own questions during the course of the class. Try to speak at least once in each of your assigned sessions. If you are unable to attend one of your scheduled days, please contact me and I will assign you to another group.

I divide students into six or seven groups (fifteen to twenty students per group) and begin the DR practice at the end of the second week of class, once enrollment has stabilized. For the first round many students are quite nervous to speak up. To help relieve anxiety, I open these sessions by asking students to pose their prepared questions about the reading, so they can get used to hearing their own voices. They can ask questions about anything. I only require that their questions: (1) invoke the assigned biblical reading directly; and (2) are put in terms intelligible to a broad, religiously-diverse audience. The goal here is to get students to slow down enough to let the Bible surprise them and then to make those surprises intelligible to students who may not share their guiding interpretive assumptions. I have found that after students speak up once or twice they gain confidence in this aspect of the assignment. Inviting students to sit towards the front of the room, if they are able, helps to mitigate the intimidation they may feel from speaking in a larger space.

This practice means that I structure every class session around large questions and leave ample space for discussion. I put one or more of these questions on the opening slide for students to consider as they settle into the room. That way, more reticent students can contemplate and even prepare their responses in advance.

Evaluation

Students assign themselves a grade for this aspect of class, though they can only assign themselves full points if they: (a) attend their assigned class session, (b) complete *all* the assigned reading for the day, and (c) complete the entire rubric.

The self-evaluation rubric consists of the following questions:

1. What percentage of the reading did you read in advance of this class?
2. Describe two passages from the assigned reading that you were prepared to discuss.
3. What two questions were you prepared to ask in this class session? Be as specific as you can, invoking the biblical text directly.
4. Describe what engagement looked like for you during class.
5. Out of 10 points, explain what grade you would assign yourself based on your answers to the above questions.

It is worth noting that for some students, speaking in class is not just a strong disinclination but not possible or healthy. I work with students to create specific strategies for their voices to be heard during their assigned sessions. However, the evaluation rubric permits students who are not able to speak up to still articulate their questions, explain their engagement (which may consist entirely of attentive listening and active notetaking), and achieve full points.

Results

Some students truly hate this assignment. It requires them to read and to attend, and it strongly encourages them to speak in a large class. Each one of these components can be profoundly challenging. But many more students, while anxious at first, find their voices through this practice. Some have shared with me that it has empowered them to speak more in other courses as well. Here is how one student recently described it:

“I really liked the designated respondents! At first I thought it was terrible, but after I did it and participated in the course, I found them really beneficial. I have thoughts and answers to questions every day in the class but I am always too scared to raise my hand (simply social anxiety!) but being told that I have to respond has helped me participate more in class.”

This practice has helped me forge connections with a larger percentage of students and to better understand their interpretive questions and concerns. I have also seen it generate connections among students within the class. Speaking up in class is a vulnerable act and it encourages students to be curious about the Bible and about one another. I have witnessed students, who were otherwise strangers, linger after class to talk in response to what they raised in our discussion. Finally, DR prevents any one student (or handful of students) from dominating discussion. Hearing from a diverse range of voices (by semester’s end, nearly every student has spoken) makes our class more socially-connected than is typical for a hundred-plus person course.

Designated Respondents is not a panacea for the problems of student anonymity, alienation, and disengagement that hamper many large courses. However, by creating clear structures for close-reading and active participation from a wide range of voices, it creates conditions for some of these issues to be assuaged.

<https://wabash.center/2024/07/voices-in-the-crowd-helping-students-speak-up-in-introduction-to-the-hebrew-bible/>