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Ten Tips (and Hard Truths) for New Teachers in Theological Education

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It is intimidating to write this blog because I am by no means an expert who has all the answers to the toughest questions about teaching in theological education. But I do want to offer these tips and hard truths. Some of what I share is a distillation of wise counsel I have received; all of what I provide is derived from my own striving and stumbling as a teacher.

1. ***Be both fully prepared and fully present in the classroom.*** As important as it is to prepare one's assigned readings, assignments, notes, and outlines, one must be careful to balance preparation with presence. If your only goals are to powerfully deliver your lecture and precisely execute your lesson plan, you may be missing what is actually happening in your classroom. Focus on how your students are learning. In addition to fielding their questions, be attentive to their body language and other verbal and nonverbal cues that signal curiosity, epiphany, confusion, and inspiration.
2. ***Don't sweat the small stuff.*** It often feels like there are a million teaching tasks. We all make a plethora of decisions every day that indicate our priorities. In determining what matters most and what matters least, I have made the conscious decision to care less about editing my teaching materials, such as my syllabi, slides, and handouts. I do not distribute sloppy or unclear documents, but I am unbothered by the occasional typo, glitch, or imperfection. If a word is misspelled or the format is slightly off, I make a note to fix it for future use and then move on to the next task.

3. ***Prioritize opportunities for students to learn, process, and shine in the classroom.*** I think we sometimes emphasize the teaching artifacts that we produce, such as handouts and lectures, because we feel as though we can exert more control over the learning outcomes. But the true measure of our teaching effectiveness is found in how deeply our students are comprehending, processing, and growing. I try to cultivate different and diverse opportunities for my students to contribute their insights. One of my practices is the invitation for one or two students to prepare in advance and share a verbal, written, or artistic reflection on an assigned reading during the first several minutes of every class session.
4. ***The diversity of students within theological education is one of its greatest strengths and one of its deepest challenges.*** Our schools likely comprise among the most diverse student populations in higher education. Almost every theological school enrolls students of all ages, ranging from their twenties to their seventies. Many of our institutions also educate students across sundry races, ethnicities, nationalities, genders, denominations, and theological viewpoints. It is enthralling to teach in classrooms abounding with such beautiful diversity. Yet it is also challenging because we must navigate pathways of learning amid complex matrices of cultural, generational, and theological differences.
5. ***Figure out how much teaching matters to you and how much it matters to your institution.*** Even though the name of the game is theological education, you must discern how heavily teaching is weighted for promotion and advancement at your institution. I take no delight in frankly expressing that some schools only give what amounts to “lip service” to teaching. In some contexts, publishing is prized more than teaching. In other cases, the highest value is service to the institution and the ecclesial tradition to which it belongs. One must still teach adequately, but there are meager external rewards for becoming an exceptional pedagogue. One must therefore balance the internal joy and meaning derived from teaching with institutional realities. To further develop one’s teaching capacities remains a worthy investment, but it is unwise to do so at the expense of other responsibilities.
6. ***Figure out how much writing matters to you and how much it matters to your institution.*** One of the strangest things about theological education is how hard it can be to decipher how much research and writing toward publication really matters at an institution. Every teacher engages in research and writes quite a bit, but many schools differentiate between research and writing to enhance one’s teaching and research and writing for the sake of scholarly publication. There is also ambiguity about publishing at some seminaries. For instance, you may be a teacher who carries a heavy instructional load and fulfills many institutional service responsibilities (and writing is rarely discussed in open at your school), but the pathway to promotion and advancement entails an external review in which an array of scholars is given instructions to assess your scholarly record strictly based upon your publications. Teaching and writing are not necessarily oppositional tasks because each practice informs and deepens the other. But

there are only so many hours in a workday, and the tasks of teaching and writing are in fact different and doing both well requires intentional self-scheduling.

7. ***Don't say yes to everything.*** I co-teach an interdisciplinary “capstone” course for MDiv students in their final year of study and we have alumni who are exercising religious leadership in various contexts return to the classroom as guest speakers. One pastor recently shared a practical word of advice that was equal parts winsome and wise. The pastor told every student to habitually look at their driver’s license to confirm that the name on it was their own and not “Jesus Christ.” The point was that some people, whether worshipers in a church, patients in a hospital, or coworkers in a nonprofit organization, would make them feel as though their ministry required them to be as available, sacrificial, and indispensable as Jesus. We theological educators must also maintain boundaries to cultivate wellness and wholeness. You can’t say yes to every request of students, colleagues, and administrators.
8. ***Don't say no to everything.*** While it is untenable to say yes to everything, it is also imprudent to say no to everything. It is easier said than done, but I think the key is to keep a disciplined schedule without overcalculating to the extent that one exists in relative isolation. One must make time to mentor students, converse with colleagues, and participate in the broader life of one’s institution as well as in academic, ecclesial, and other communities beyond one’s institution.
9. ***You can be grateful you have a job without letting your institution take advantage of you.*** One contradiction within theological education, and higher education generally, is the glaring inattention to the economic injustices within our own systems, such as the inequities of contingent faculty positions. At seminaries like mine, it certainly feels as though we want to address every structural reform in the church and the world except our own. Instead of engaging our injustices, one common refrain across theological education is to tell new faculty with tenure-track or renewable contract appointments that they should feel fortunate to have a job. Some administrators and senior colleagues wield this sense of indebtedness as a weapon when insisting new teachers fulfill this or that task. New teachers should parry this abuse of professional obligation with clear boundaries and a healthy understanding of self and one’s vocation. New teachers can also privately note that the administrators and senior colleagues promulgating the twisted logic of “You should be grateful you have a job” are the very individuals, with their higher compensations, who should be the most thankful to have their jobs.
10. ***Be a lifelong learner as you continue teaching.*** I think it is vital to keep learning new things so that we are attuned to the wonder of discovery. Some in theological education engage interests that significantly contrast with our everyday practices in the academy, such as cooking or woodworking. Others acquire new skills and deepen our capacities in disciplines such as creative writing and digital scholarship. There are many ways to go about the journey of lifelong learning so that we retain a posture of humility

and foster an unending hunger for growth.

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