



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Running Wild!

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Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

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(And audio recording of this blog may be found [here](#).)

Creative teachers are sometimes labelled as people who *run wild* --- meaning *we* are people whose boundaries are too wide, whose disciplinary habits and practices are too flimsy, whose appetites look beyond what is safely seen, commonly known, or conventionally acceptable. I am a creative who has, for many years, made a practice of fostering wildness in my classrooms.

I believe that the invitation of teaching is for students to join-in with running wild, i.e. create new worlds, grapple with unsolvable problems, cross boundaries as a gesture of connection and justice seeking, build stairways as we climb to uncharted heights. I have met many colleagues who concur with the aspiration of *running wild!* - but who are too afraid, too anxious, too self-conscious, too hobbled to risk shaping classrooms from this vision. Teachers fear that if they move from a content driven classroom to a classroom which is learner centered that then the students will run wild over the teachers! The fear is that the wildness will make a shambles of the intellectual endeavor, embarrass the teacher, and shame the institution. This fear can be tamed.

Before joining a seminary faculty, I worked for many years as the minister of Christian Education at a NYC church. I revamped their large Sunday School. In this seven year process, I

learned about teachers' eagerness to teach freely, with creativity and openness and the ways that that eagerness can be snuffed out by fear of losing control of the classroom.

Before the start of our fall classes, the church school teachers participated in three weekends of teacher-training using a laboratory method. During this training, we rehearsed the curriculum through practice sessions. This allowed us to get acquainted with one another, do lesson planning, develop new skills, and have fun. We learned to teach by teaching.

At the first teacher meeting of the fall, I gathered the teachers to discuss their work and to reflect on the first three Sundays of teaching. After having observed their teaching for the first three Sundays, I had an overall negative criticism of their teaching. I was nervous about giving this feedback. I was anxious about their reaction. I decided to be straightforward. The eighteen of us were seated together at the table. I spoke in a warm but firm tone. I said,

When I walk the halls listening to your classes, I mostly hear your voices. This means that, primarily, you are learning the materials you are teaching by rehearsing the lesson – out loud to the students. Remember our teacher training sessions? We do not want classrooms filled with your voice. We practiced activities that invite the students into energetic lessons.

(I paused in hopes they would remember the training and practice)

I want to hear the voices of the students. I want to hear the children's voices engaging the lesson with their questions, concerns, laughter, reading aloud, talking to you and one another. When the children are the primary speakers and doers in the classroom, they are more likely to learn, retain, and be engaged with the lesson.

I felt the nervousness in the group rise. Two teachers pushed their chairs back from the table. One teacher folded his arms across his chest. The 5th grade teacher spoke up,

Lynne, I need to be honest. You give us creative activities to do with the children, but I am afraid of losing control of the classroom if I let the children do too much talking or move around the room too much. If I do the talking, I am in control. I'm afraid they will run wild!

I threw up my arms like someone had made a touchdown and shouted,

YESSS! Thank you! You are exactly right! Thank you for your honesty and good observations. Thank you for disclosing your fear.

This playfulness lowered some of the tension in the room. The 10th grade teacher still sat with his arms folded across his chest, and now a scowl on his face.

I continued,

You are right. We do not want chaos in the classrooms with children running amuck. Nobody learns when students are out of control. But we know that students learn best when they are

the ones engaged in activity. The various learning activities allow them to take hold of the stories and learn by participating. Sitting quietly teaches them to sit quietly, and that Sunday School is an uninteresting and voiceless place. We want children to learn by doing, interacting, questioning, exploring, investigating, wondering, and playing. And I need you to teach in these ways.

I paused for pushback. But no pushback came. I continued,

Please, try some of the more creative activity options in the curriculum. I assure you that chaos will not ensue. The children will have fun and so will you.

The fears articulated by the Sunday School teachers are the same kinds of fears I hear from colleagues about their adult students in college, university and seminary settings. That is, teachers fear that if they loosen their grip on a session that the students will say or do something Wild! - something unanticipated, unwanted, unhelpful, unplanned that will embarrass the teacher or show the lack of a teacher. Teachers fear that loosening control will put them in danger of being exposed as frauds or imposters. These fears are real. Sometimes these fears are paralyzing or debilitating. These fears can be calmed and overcome.

Teaching, with practice, can be improved if you are willing to give up control. For many professors, this teaching tactic feels counter-intuitive and too risky, but my experience knows it to be true.

If we surrender content driven approaches - then what will happen?

I am pleased to report that none of the Sunday School teachers stormed out of the meeting that day. Each teacher, in their own way, slowly over the years of their commitment, learned to select the learning activities that involved arts, crafts, a wide assortment of storytelling methods, and even trips to other parts of the building. I noticed that the primary motivation for their risk taking was the feedback they received from their students.

When the learners were invited to become the story tellers replete with costumes, paints, and instruments their glee was palpable. Enthusiasm grew when the students knew the lessons could include map making, puppet designing, interviews with pastors or baking the communion bread. Excited children began arriving at Sunday School before the start time and asking to stay after the end time. Teachers moved from being reticent to feeling confident when they discovered learners were not there to judge their efforts but were there to benefit from their teaching.

Over the seven years, we moved away from being a place of *instruction* and toward becoming a community of learning - the teachers were the agents of that wild move!

Consider these reflection questions:

What are your creative or artistic interests and how might you bring those interests into your

classroom's learning activities?

What amount of time do you need for course preparation when planning for learning activities that are multidimensional and creative?

What funding is available for supplies, resources, excursions, and exhibits?

Who can you partner with to create a more vibrant experience for your students?

<https://wabash.center/2025/01/running-wild/>