



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



When a Course is Tanking

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Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse

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If you teach long enough, you will teach a course that feels flat, has low morale, or even fails. While a totally ruined course is rare, there are moments when the sinking, the malaise—yours and that of the students, happens. We all know this experience.

If you have never taught a course that has tanked, then you have likely been a student in a course that has. No real need to recount or describe all the ways a course can fail—the ways a course can “go south” are legion. The more important emphasis is to know that when a course is collapsing it can be rescued. When you feel the course sinking

do not blame yourself.

do not blame the students.

do not blame the administration.

do not blame your family.

do not blame your pets.

do not blame the moon phase.

do not blame the state of the nation.

do not blame the national economy.

do not blame climate change.

Blaming is ineffective. Finding fault, placing fault, shaming, guilt or scapegoating rarely

corrects the problem. Sinking courses are not saved through blame.

Do not ignore the situation or pretend that, without adjustment, it will mend. If you sense that there is trouble with the course, the students know there is trouble with the course. When you find yourself watching the clock during your own class session – this is a clue that something needs to be adjusted, altered, changed.

Resist the impulse to knuckle down, grin and bear it.

Resist the impulse to stay-the-course, stick to your guns!

Resist the impulse to “right-fight” and believe whatever you planned, how you planned, is best and “be damned!” anyone who will not comply with your plans.

Consider that rescuing a course might take a multi-pronged approach. The recovery of the course might need support from others. Don’t be a hero - please ask for help. If you feel as if the course is weak, ask for help. If you feel lost or disoriented, ask for help. If you do not know how you feel or what to do, ask for help.

What help?

- Get a new perspective, fresh eyes, a more seasoned approach, an empathetic listener. Talk to colleagues. Talk with a trusted colleague at your school, or a trusted colleague beyond your school. You might talk just once, or you might talk several times. Describe the incident or incidents and ask them to listen to what might be changed to strengthen the course.
- Consider asking a trusted colleague to observe your teaching and then assist you with reflection. These talks are not for confessing to being an imposter. Resist reducing these conversations to disclosing your deep-seated anxieties about public performance (save that for your therapist). Use these conversations to troubleshoot, problem solve and strategize for better teaching and strengthening of your course design.
- Consider, at the beginning of the semester, creating a small reflection group of colleagues (3 or 4 people) for a semester long conversation so when the course feels like it is not going well you have established conversation partners. The group might be organized around studying teaching resources, together.
- Talk with a trusted student to get feedback. Talk with a small group of students and ask their opinion. Perhaps, take class time to ask the entire class for feedback and suggestions.
- Talk to human resource personnel, consult the faculty handbook, know your Title IX procedures. Sometimes bullying behaviors are the culprit in troubled classroom environments.

What might be needed?

- Consider that you might need to recast elements of the syllabus. Consider creating

different assignments, adjusting timelines, subtracting some readings or adding new kinds of readings. Add a field trip. Invite a guest speaker.

- Ask yourself about yourself. Are you too tired to teach well? Are you bored in your own course? Are you anxious? Are you distracted? Are you disappointed, grieving or just sad? Do you have an experience of belonging in your institution and in your own classroom? Your vibe radiates to the students and permeates all aspects of the course.
- Are the materials in the course too advanced for the students or too inconsequential? Are the materials culturally aligned and relevant to the students' experiences and expectations? What story are you inviting the students into—is it a story of their imaginations and aspirations?
- What are the larger happenings of the school, community, region and country that are affecting your classroom? What would it mean to weave these happenings into the conversation?
- Perhaps it is the students - by which I mean - perhaps you do not know the students and their lives well enough. In what ways can you get better acquainted with your students. Do your students come to class tired after a long day of work? Are your morning students tired after having worked all night? Are they taking too many courses? If they are rested, are they hungry while in your class? Awareness of the conditions of your students might help with addressing some of the malaise.

Do not be surprised when a course tanks. It happens to the best of teachers. When a course is “not going well,” do not abandon it or your students. Learn, by experience, how to adjust and adapt to create a meaningful experience for your learners and for yourself.

<https://wabash.center/2025/02/when-a-course-is-tanking/>