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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching through the Collective Trauma of a Polycrisis

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We are teaching through a polycrisis – a situation in which the problems we and our students are facing in the world are complex and interpenetrating, increasing the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of our lives in the world.

Many of our students went to high school or college, raised children, or cared for dying parents through the thick of the COVID pandemic. Now these students are moving through our classrooms during the most socially and politically disruptive era many of them have ever lived through.

Add to this the wildfires and flooding and hurricanes that have increased in frequency and intensity due to anthropogenic climate change. Add to this persistent attacks on structures of care for trans people and their erasure from public spaces. Add to this ICE raids in all our communities, deporting the family, friends, and neighbors of our students and colleagues (or our students and colleagues themselves). Add to this...everything else.

The reason these realities land so heavily on educational institutions is not just due to the targeting of schools, professors, DEI, and curriculum by the current administration. It is also because *our institutions are one of the scant few intact-yet-precarious structures of community and support some of our students have in their lives.*

Not only has the individualism of our society gradually eroded collective structures we need in times of crisis – those which help us to hold our grief, our uncertainty, and our fear within caring community – but our current US political regime is also engaging in a process of “organized abandonment” that is systematically stripping away the supportive structures that our students and their communities depend on.

We will increasingly see collective trauma showing up in our classrooms and on our campuses. Trauma is the bodymind’s *response* to events and not the events themselves, so personal experiences will vary along a stress-trauma continuum. Be aware of how differently students may be experiencing this moment depending upon whether they are LGBTQIA+ or BIPOC or immigrants.

Polycrisis experiences like we’re facing become traumatic when there are not adequate support structures within which to hold our experiences of grief, fear, anger, and uncertainty. Adequate supportive relationships mitigate the effects of a crisis from becoming traumatic, though they’ll continue to be very stressful.

Dissociation and inaction can be defense mechanisms against the overwhelm of collective trauma. We may feel this. Our students may exhibit this. We need to subvert this collectively through our actions as professors and administrators to meet this moment with robust forms of care for our campuses and the communities our students belong to.

Anger and reactivity can become attempts to restore a fracturing status quo. We shouldn’t be surprised at the anger. It’s a signal about what’s going on in student’s lives. Your institution may be the only relatively safe place for a student to even direct their anger, misplaced though it may be at times. Take anger seriously and treat it with care. Remember: you can’t argue people out of a trauma response.

We need to be mindful of the ways that focus is going to be fractured for many of our students in the coming months. (Oh yeah... ours likely will be, too!) Students may fear falling behind, so some supportive and encouraging messages addressing this may be helpful from time to time. Additionally, faculty productivity may fall behind as more of our time is directed to supporting students in ways we may not normally have needed to in the past.

A few things are key to our response in meeting the moment’s critical needs:

Trust takes time and relationship to build and many of our institutions are starting behind in this regard with many students for a wide variety of reasons. Whatever we can do to cultivate trust and build relationship will be critical.

Time for open processing of student experiences of this this era will be vital. Subjugating these painful and fearful experiences into silence will mean they’ll be processed in much less helpful ways that will ultimately create more disruption to students’ education and formation.

Our expressions of leadership need to exhibit consistency and congruence, both critical in

crises and amid pervasive uncertainty. We don't need to have all the answers, but we need to listen carefully and take all the pertinent questions seriously.

How we engage in this moment as educators is teaching students something, and we need to be sure it's teaching what we really hope for them to learn when they're leading communities in the larger world.

<https://wabash.center/2025/04/teaching-through-the-collective-trauma-of-a-polycrisis/>