



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



My Personal Policies List (& Janine's List, too)

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Regardless of how many times pedagogical guru Parker Palmer is asked, he refuses to comply. Dr. Palmer, in his writings, speeches, and workshops, resists reducing the mystical adventure of critically reflective teaching to “tips, tricks, and techniques.” While I agree wholeheartedly, I also know that what interests, challenges, or touches me about becoming a better teacher can sometimes be summed up in a sentiment, a phrase or a few sentences.

Over my years of teaching (for more than twenty years I’ve told myself that I am half-way to becoming a good teacher; the longer I teach - the more I feel as if I am half-way there), I have developed certain quiriness-es, personal policies, and particular habits of practice. I will spare you the stories of “the why” for each of these habits, ways, and procedures. Suffice it to say, these are the practices and behaviors which serve my sensitivities and limitations. These guidelines are not ridged dogma or laws. They are personal moorings which keep my values true in my relationships with students and allow me to feel like I can hold the space of teaching for which I am responsible. I offer them not to suggest anyone else should adopt one or all. Instead, I offer them as encouragement for your own reflection and list making.

These are a few of my personal policies:

1. It's better to be strict in the beginning of the course, then lenient as the semester progresses, than lenient in the beginning and strict at the end.
2. Be intentional about the use of silences, of pauses, of whispering - there is great power in the silences.
3. Don't teach while tired; don't teach while angry; don't teach while sleepy; don't teach while sick.
4. Be funny - humor in class helps.
5. Teach after having listened to what students say they want to learn; learn to hear what students are meaning when they say what they want to learn.
6. Tell stories about my mother, her mother and her mother in class to invoke ancestral assistance.
7. Routinely, invite two or three students into a closer vantage point of my work through being teaching assistants, research assistants - having a posse is good for you and them and other students.
8. It's not enough to be engaging and participatory - find ways to be genuine and authentic in classroom interactions.
9. Resist grade inflation.
10. Require assignments be turned in on-time; enforce the penalty for lateness. Return the graded assignments the week after they are handed-in; if assignments are returned later, apologize.
11. Watch the breathing of students on the first day of class; the longer students hold their breath the more challenged they will be in trusting throughout the semester.
12. Smile in class; be happy to be performing your job - have fun teaching.
13. Notice the shoes worn by the students and listen to the stories the shoes tell.
14. Work at being trust worthy so that when you must give a negative critique - the student trusts your judgement.
15. Know that the fear which is free-floating in your classroom is likely yours as much as theirs.
16. Learn to distinguish between a lazy student and a student who is trying his/her best but not succeeding.
17. If everything that is is not visible, then teach as if the invisible matters.

In a moment of checking with my research assistant, Janine Carambot, to see if she thought a blog about personal policies was interesting, I asked her



to write a list of my personal policies as she experienced them in my classroom as an MDIV student. Without seeing my list, this is what Janine wrote:

- 1) You encourage students to spend time with the question. You insist that the better questions to ask are “What if...” and/or open ended questions which provoke imagination and wonder by the answerer.
- 2) You refuse sugarcoating the hard things.
- 3) You seem to be learning with us; you ask us questions and then say “interesting...” when we answer; it is a mutual experience for you.
- 4) You tell us that we need to ask questions for which we do not know the answer - this is a new experience in learning and faith.
- 5) You do not waste time with “niceness.”
- 6) You encourage us to go deeper when we try to give shallow “churchy” answers.
- 7) You enable us without giving us answers - you believe the answers depend on context and our social location.
- 8) You have a way of creating assignments that always beg clarification, but they seem to be intentionally evasive so you get our own interpretation, creativity, and immersion of the assignment.
- 9) You have a sense of humor about the things that we tend to take so seriously as if our life depended on it (mostly our theology). If we were able to laugh with you it was because we saw the limits of our understanding; if we were offended it meant that we didn’t want to learn or we felt threatened.
- 10) You busted open all of our understandings to “educational ministries” by showing us it is

not just “Sunday school or bible study” but something deeper that would seek to overcome the insidiousness of the “-isms.” You tell us from the beginning that your classes are “not about Education programs in church, but about cultivating for the church’s ministry and mission in the world and using education as a tool for healing and liberation.” This is different than anything we expected. Your teaching is made of the things that we didn’t know we needed or wanted - but we discovered that we did and we do.

11) You bring your own voice and creativity into our classes that help us learn in a way that is a blend of scholarship, tradition, “otherness” and poetry.

Thank you Janine - I am humbled to be known.

<https://wabash.center/2016/05/my-personal-policies-list-janines-list-too/>