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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Need to Speak Up . . . from the Start!

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After about six months and fifteen horrible haircuts in the San Francisco Bay area I finally found somebody who could give me a decent haircut, and I became a loyal customer for the next six and a half years. Even now, when I'm back in Berkeley, I stop in to have my hair cut in the same storefront salon. It's one of those first come-first served setups where you don't need an appointment. You just show up and wait your turn, and for about a dollar a minute from chair to door you are good to go.

I recognize that this is beginning to look like a very ill disguised and poorly executed embedded advertisement in a blog about teaching and learning, but even if I were generous enough to take the chance that you might get in line before me, I couldn't introduce you to my stylist of nine plus years because then I would have to admit that I don't know her name. That's right. We've exchanged cash for cuts, holiday gifts, smiles and waves, but not names for almost ten years, and all because we didn't introduce ourselves on that very first visit, and with each additional encounter in which we avoided the awkwardness of the standard, "By the way, I'm . . .," it became ever harder to rectify until we finally just settled into a Seinfeld-worthy impasse, where we talked about my wife and son by name while remaining anonymous to each other year after year.

On a recent trip back to Berkeley, I was sitting in the chair of "the stylist who cannot be

named,” when the renewed absurdity of the situation reminded me of an observation made by a colleague in the Boston area about the importance of students speaking up in class at the beginning of a semester. According to this colleague who has thirty years of teaching experience, a student who does not speak up in the first two weeks of class is unlikely to say much in the rest of the semester, because, in addition to the anxiety that plagues many students (especially those who are more introverted and reserved) about saying something stupid or wrong, he or she now *feels* the added pressure of having to say something exceptional to justify breaking their pattern of silence.

Is there anything wrong with allowing a student to indulge the awkwardness they might feel about speaking in class? I do think that it is important to respect and honor a student’s inclination (whether that is personal or cultural), but my point here has to do with ways to draw someone out (as opposed to the arguably easy but potentially counterproductive practice of calling someone out). I would further suggest that helping students speak up in class consistently and regularly has at least two important implications for teaching and learning. First, speaking up, whether in the form of a question or a comment, is itself a process of thinking. In other words, it is an act that helps bring clarification, even if it is a clarification of where one’s confusion lies. Second, it helps build a teaching and learning community that is characterized by collaboration and mutual learning. Even if a particular student is herself or himself clear about the subject or the topic that is at hand, choosing to be involved and contribute to the discussion supports and perhaps even encourages a cooperative and engaging classroom dynamic.

If this colleague’s observation about students speaking up in class is valid, perhaps we as instructors should consider being more intentional about helping our students speak up in those first two weeks of a course. How can we do so in ways that are interesting, instructive, and non-threatening? Is it possible to think of ways that we can turn even the routine logistics on the very first day of a semester (such as checking the roster or sharing the syllabus) into opportunities for students to start speaking up and to feel comfortable doing so? How does an instructor present himself or herself as one who welcomes and values students’ thoughts and opinions?

Depending on your institution’s academic calendar, your course(s) for 2016 may or may not have reached its/their third week. I don’t think we need to be rigid about any magic number, but I am persuaded (not least of all by personal experience) that the longer our students wait, the more difficult it becomes for them to speak up in class. So whatever week we may be into our individual course(s), I’d like to propose that we consider *and share* ideas to facilitate early engagement by every student in every class.

<https://wabash.center/2016/02/the-need-to-speak-up-from-the-start/>