



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching Students Where They Are

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Teach students where they are! This forthright adage is deceptively difficult. The question becomes - where are they in proximity to my own location? In other words, what does it mean for the effectiveness of my teaching if the cost of locating my students is heart wrenching?

I am invested in doing more than simply mirroring back to students their own social location. Adding an African-American author to the reading list for the Black students or adding a female voice to the syllabus for the women creates a climate of ill-preparedness for all students. I hope to inspire students into louder, clearer voices for justice. I want them to be empowered to fight for the minoritized. I wish for them to become coalition builders, collaborators and to develop unorthodox partnerships. I want students from the majority cultures to be change agents, as much as I expect students from marginalized constituencies to be prophetic. These lofty hopes send me on a journey to find them in familiar and unfamiliar places. Teaching in the unfamiliar is the heart challenge.

Locating the multiple whereabouts of students means acknowledging their diversity and

recognizing that differences are not deficiencies. I have learned that understanding the constitutive parts of any diversity is a key to teaching well in diversity. That being said, the diversity in my classrooms can be overwhelming. I am eager to learn more about the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation so that I might better design more relevant lessons. When the categories of diversity get so intricate as to include adult learning styles, theological perspective, regional/national and international cultures, consumer mindsets, etc., I am bowled over. Am I expected to have sound knowledge about each of their categories of diversity? Which diversity(ies) is significant regarding their learning and formation?

The whereabouts of the students who trouble my heart the most are the students who are not conservative in their thinking, but conservative about thinking itself. They bring to the classroom a very narrow experience of life, with a constricted curiosity, and a truncated imagination for thinking new thoughts about old ideas. Or worse yet, they believe that thinking and faith are antithetical and attempt to silence those who believe otherwise. These students signal with their behavior that they expect to be affirmed and rewarded for what they already know rather than being challenged to expand and grow. I am stymied when I locate my students and find them in isolation, xenophobia and disconnection. It is heartbreaking when my work is reduced to coaxing resentful, parochial students into reflecting upon their unexamined privilege, rage and brokenness.

The cost of my commitment to locating my students is too often my own broken heart. My jaw drops in disbelief each time an African American woman speaks in favor of the sexism and misogyny in the Black Church. I am still caught off guard when white students assure me that issues of racism were solved in the 1960's. Each semester, earnest straight students feel offended when our Christian seminary curriculum supports the ordination of homosexuals. Suppose locating my students takes me to places I do not respect, places which are uncomfortable to my own values and sensibilities? What if I am unsafe or repulsed by their values? What happens to my own spiritual health when I am drawn into the loveless places they inhabit?

My struggle to locate my students in unfamiliar-to-me places is eased when I draw upon proven competencies. I have learned that empathy is one of the strongest tools of teaching in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable locales. I believe empathy is a choice that is made moment to moment and student to student. My hunch is that empathy is a critical pedagogical tool for fostering consistency in diversity. When I allow myself to reflect upon my personal experiences of fear about learning, I have more compassion for my students. In the best moments, this kind of vulnerability nurtures authentic conversations between me and them. We learn, in cautious baby steps, to trust one another.

Finally, the quest to locate the whereabouts of my students means being aware of my own location - it means knowing my own heart. Students ask me the powerful, un-spoken question, "Do you practice these ideas on liberation and justice in your own life? What will be risked if we adopt these ideals?" Teaching students in unfamiliar locations requires that I can answer these questions with integrity and that I know how to heal my own heart.

This is the 1st post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2015/08/teaching-students-where-they-are/>