



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



When Our Students Teach Us

Kate Blanchard, *Alma College*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

November 11, 2014

Tags: collaborative learning | engaged teaching | embodied teaching

I recently found myself on a Friday night amid a group of twenty-somethings, mostly women, who were celebrating their periods.

Yes, you read that correctly.

The students of the women's resource center on campus decided to host a "menarche party" in honor of their monthly bleeding. They wore festive red clothing, blew up red balloons, offered red velvet cake, and handed out red bags of party favors. Perhaps readers will resonate with my husband's one-word response to this event ("Gross"), but if you can bear with me just a minute I will get to why this matters for teaching.

Because I am involved with our Women's and Gender Studies program, I was one of two professors invited to speak at this party. Apparently they thought my being more than twice their age would qualify me to speak with some authority about menstruation. In my very brief remarks, I was quick to assure them that I could speak only from my own experiences. They then opened up about their experiences, telling stories to an appreciative audience who laughed almost non-stop for the next hour.

The thing is this: although I giggled about going to this party and thought I was attending it as



a favor – to offer a show of faculty support for the efforts of our students – I really did come away from it feeling better about the body that I inhabit. It was actually a pleasure to sit in a room full of young women talking openly about their monthly cycles and related awkward moments with parents, friends, sexual partners, or younger siblings. The students seemed so much more comfortable in their skins than I was at their age, steeped as I was in Puritanical fear of my sexuality. Moreover, the students understood that having a community of celebration was important to their own self-images. It turned out to be *they* who did *me* a favor, since I can't really imagine another context in which I might participate in a similar conversation.

It was an earlier group of women who got me to see *The Vagina Monologues* for the first time – something I had avoided until then because the title caused me to recoil. I finally went to see it here on campus only to support my students who were performing. But once again, I found myself deeply affected by their undertaking in ways I couldn't have predicted. Their passion and bravery changed my thinking about the play itself and about women's bodies more generally, and even inspired a couple of scholarly projects – most importantly an edited collection that included some of my students' own writings. None of this would have happened without their initiative and influence on me.

Perhaps such moments are too small or trivial to be of much consequence, except that a teaching life is punctuated by such small moments. We think we know where things are going, then we realize that they are going somewhere else; we think we are imparting wisdom to our students, then we realize our students may be wiser about some matters than we are. I'm not sure why I should be surprised when twenty-somethings remind me of how much I have left to learn. When was the last time your students taught you something? What was it?

<https://wabash.center/2014/11/when-our-students-teach-us/>