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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Contemplative Pedagogy in Islamic Studies

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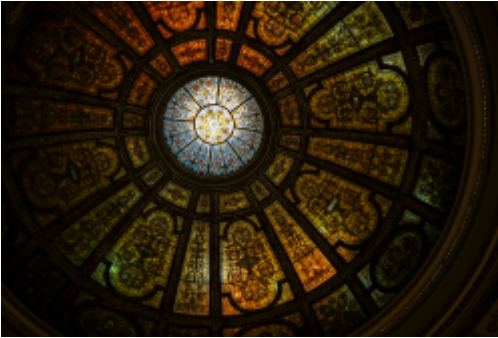
Tags: contemplative pedagogy | active learning | teaching attentive listening | teaching compassion | teaching meditation

My teacher training focused on goals and assessment. When I conduct workshops on teaching and whenever I am asked for advice on teaching, I tell instructors to clarify goals and work backward. Two years ago I gave a presentation on technology in the classroom. I included a laundry list of gadgets and apps—absolutely. “Check this out!” “Look at what this website can do.” “Flip your classroom.” But behind all of the gee-whiz fascination of tech, we still had to start with goals. I believe in this approach and I believe in measuring student outcomes.

But even when I was starting out as a teacher, I focused on more ambiguous questions as well. How can I build a stronger classroom community? How can I help students develop a deeper appreciation for mystical literature like *The Conference of the Birds*? Barbara Walvoord reports that half of public and over two-thirds of private university students identify “spiritual and religious development” as an essential goal in the religion classroom. Do I have a responsibility in this regard? How can any of this be assessed?

For this blog, I want to touch on a question implied at the end of my last post: How can we teach tolerance while teaching about Islam? Such a question might fall under the broader rubric of anti-bias education. There are many resources on these topics and even though it focuses on K-12, I highly recommend the Teaching Tolerance Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center to all educators. Searching for “Islam” on their website will bring up dozens of

resources and activities that can be modified for the college environment. My newest approach for cultivating compassion in the classroom comes out of the contemplative pedagogy movement. I have been recently introduced to contemplative teaching through a program sponsored by the Teaching and Learning Center at Wake Forest University.



Contemplative pedagogy is contemplation in action aimed at educating the whole person with much of the same spirit as the Jesuit education I have benefitted from. It seems to me that there is often a disconnect between the abiding mission of a university and the more narrow goals alluded to above. Contemplative pedagogy aims to help educators reflect more deeply on the purposes of their teaching and it aims to help students become similarly self-aware through a range of practices including meditation, reflective journaling, deeper reading, and attentive listening.

To some extent, I have always used these practices in my teaching. Respecting silence in the classroom and becoming comfortable with long pauses or “wait time” after asking a question has always been important to me. Developing an awareness of purpose in connection with goals that is transparent to students is a fundamental practice. There is no radical separation between contemplative pedagogy and what is being taught in all education programs. I do, however, believe that my new focus on contemplative pedagogy is helping me to think more holistically about such practices. I am better able to draw a connection between my approach to teaching and the moral and perceptive qualities I want to cultivate in my students. In *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush explain, “What distinguishes the experience and integration discussed in this book is that the experience is focused on students’ introspection and their cultivation of awareness of themselves and relationship to others.”

There are many ways to teach compassion through Islam. It is a central theme to Islam itself;



God is compassionate and merciful. The Qur’an tells us,

“What will explain to you what the steep path is? It is to free a slave, to feed at a time of hunger an orphaned relative or a poor person in distress, and to be one of those who believes and urges one another to steadfastness and compassion. Those who do this will be on the right-hand side. (Qur’an 90:12-18).” Our teaching can help students to better appreciate the vision of Islam and how it operates as a way of life for adherents. We can improve student awareness of false media representations of Muslims, help them to understand everyday prejudice faced by American Muslims, and encourage them to look at Islam from a nuanced rather than essentializing perspective. To all of this, we can add meditative exercises of care and concern meant to awaken students to their own compassion and the relationship between their learning and social responsibility. Such exercises encourage students to quiet their minds and envision the shared desire for love and kindness among human beings.

The spirit of practices like this can be built into the architecture of a class. In *Meditation and the Classroom*, Bridget Blomfield describes how she encourages students to develop their own sense of *adab* in the learning environment. Translated in a variety of ways, she is using *adab* as “virtuous behavior” or “good manners” meant to develop the practitioner “spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually.” She writes, “The practice of *adab* is used in the learning environment to initiate the students into a new understanding of themselves and a way to relate to others with attentive compassion.” It is an attitude of graciousness and humility that appears conspicuously absent from much of our public discourse, especially in an election year. But who bears the responsibility for answering this deficit? A share of that burden must fall on the shoulders of university educators. Returning us to the reflection on measurable goals I used to start this entry, Blomfield offers, “Educational environments often value the putting forth of more information, not the personal meaning underneath that information. I believe that intellect and spirituality are complementary, permitting students to write in a scholarly fashion while maintaining a personal and heartfelt understanding.”

If we can understand ourselves, we will better understand others. If we can better understand others, we can be compassionate toward them as well. The achievement of such a goal cannot be measured out on a sheet of paper but neither can its value.

<https://wabash.center/2016/11/contemplative-pedagogy-in-islamic-studies/>