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## DESIGN & ANALYSIS

# Learning Design: Discussing Political Issues with Ruth

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## ABSTRACT

In this learning design, the book of Ruth is read closely and critically in order to foster dialogue about political issues in the classroom. Using bell hooks' model of engaged pedagogy, political issues such as feminism, immigration, gender, sex, and consent are carefully addressed through the pedagogical strategies described. Teachers may use all of the strategies in a full unit on Ruth, or they may choose one or two to implement in a single class. Cobb suggests the use of polling, creative expression through drawing, videos, small group discussions, and maps to incite thoughtful conversation about relevant political issues and the book of Ruth.

## KEYWORDS

Ruth, pedagogy, teaching, politics, feminism, immigration, gender

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks 1994, 12). Even though bell hooks wrote this sentence nearly twenty-five years ago, the sentiment endures. To foster critical thinking about religion and politics, the classroom is a fruitful place to start. In this learning design, I suggest the book of Ruth as an ideal biblical text for engaging political discourse in the classroom. Aspects of the narrative address political issues including immigration, feminism, gender roles, sex, and consent. Pedagogically, Ruth can be used to instigate conversations on these relevant topics while students are reading and thinking critically about the text.

## The Context And Pedagogical Purpose

I teach undergraduates in a small liberal arts college in the southeast United States where evangelical Christianity is a strong cultural norm. I use the following teaching tactic primarily with first-year students in a required biblical studies course offered in the core curriculum, with typically twenty-eight students in the room. I employ these strategies halfway through the semester, once students have become accustomed to a classroom climate that fosters mutual respect while initiating dialogues about controversial issues. I have encouraged and created this climate by adopting the pedagogical theory laid out by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). In this book, hooks offers experience and strategies for "engaged pedagogy," which challenges instructors to be self-aware and open about their own humanity and excitement about the subject while simultaneously inviting students to be equal participants in the discussion, where the voices of all present are validated and valued.

The strategies outlined below can be implemented in two fifty- or seventy-five-minute class sessions, or one longer two- to three-hour session. Because the exercises are versatile, professors/instructors may also choose the exercises they prefer and use them independently, or mix-and-match, according to the needs of the course. These strategies can also be easily incorporated into an online course, especially as platforms such as Zoom ([2020](#)) allow for polling, breakout rooms for discussion, and screen sharing.

## Description Of Strategies

The book of Ruth, while only four chapters in length, is full of thought-provoking ideas, concepts, and issues relevant to our current political context. The sections that follow utilize pedagogical strategies such as: technology, film criticism, creativity, small group discussions, polling software, dialogue, and mapping. When teaching Ruth, I do not lecture, but guide the students into the text through these strategies and engaged pedagogy.

### *Ruth and Feminism*

I begin class with a fifteen-minute discussion on what it means to be a feminist. While this question might seem simple to some, many students, especially in my own context, struggle with what they have heard about feminism in the news or what others have told them about feminists. In order to encourage students to discuss this occasionally difficult topic, I utilize polling software such as iClicker ([2020](#)) or PollEverywhere ([2020](#)) in order to ask an anonymous question of the group. First, I ask: “Which words or phrases do you think of when you hear the word feminist?” After students have entered their answers, I allow the software to populate a word cloud ([Word Art 2020](#)) which will include the students’ own answers. If more than one student uses the word “empowerment,” for example, that word appears larger on the word cloud. This strategy involves a bit of risk because students might include a negatively-charged word or phrase in their anonymous answer. For instance, I often encounter terms like “man-hater” or “irrelevant.” However, I welcome the opportunity to discuss these stereotypes with my class, and the anonymous polling software allows these viewpoints to surface without implicating a particular student.

Once the word cloud is generated, we look together at the words used to describe feminism. I ask students which words or phrases they notice. We also talk openly about any negative words that have surfaced. I ask the class, “Why do some people have negative views about feminism?” I conclude by emphasizing the simplest definition for feminism: Advocacy for the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. I then take a moment to introduce them to the term intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group.” I note the ways in which feminists today often advocate for other oppressed groups and communities in addition to women. I begin with this exercise, instead of beginning with Ruth, in order to motivate students into thinking about women, agency, equality, and politics. This exercise also functions to provoke open dialogue and conversation in the classroom.

I then play this [video \(Sarkeesian 2009\)](#) to introduce my students to the [Bechdel test \(2020\)](#) (named for the well-known cartoonist, Allison Bechdel).<sup>1</sup> The brief test analyzes current films according to the following requirements: (1) The movie must have two or more women in it who have names, (2) the women must talk to one another, (3) about something other than a man. The video highlights the large number of films that do not pass the Bechdel test. I first ask the students what they think of this test, and if they can think of a recent film they have seen that does pass the test. This incites a bit of discussion about current movies and the question of female presence in those films. Then, I bring up Ruth, which they have read prior to class. I ask: Does Ruth pass the Bechdel test? Before the students discuss their answers, I utilize polling software again and ask the students to choose (a) yes or (b) no. I display the results for the class, which are typically mixed. Then, I open discussion for students to defend their answers for the class. Finally, I move to the final question: Is Ruth a feminist text? While the Bechdel test is not an indication of whether a film is “feminist” or not, the discussion guides the students into considering how the text treats women.

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<sup>1</sup> The idea to apply the Bechdel test to Ruth developed in conversation with several colleagues at Drew University, where I received my doctorate and where we often discussed the Bible and pedagogy.

## Ruth as a Graphic Novel

In order to encourage the students to read and think about the text closely and creatively, the second exercise that I use is one I call “Ruth as a Graphic Novel.” This is usually a larger part of the class and takes half an hour, typically. I divide the class into groups of three to four students. I give each group a notecard with a section of Ruth on it as well as a small (8x10) dry erase board, dry erase marker, and eraser.<sup>2</sup> Because of the size of my class, I divide the students into eight groups; my textual divisions are: [1:1-5](#); [1:6-18](#); [1:19-24](#); [2:1-13](#); [2:14-23](#); [3](#); [4:1-12](#); [4:13-17](#).<sup>3</sup> However, a variety of divisions would work for this exercise, for instance a class could be divided into four groups with a chapter per group. I instruct each group to use the board to create a panel of pictures (for example, see Figure 1), using very limited text, to illustrate the events that occur in their passage of Ruth. They may use stick figures; it need not be an intricate work of art. I give the students ten to fifteen minutes to create their panels and I walk around complimenting their work or asking questions about what they have included. When the students are done, we line up the panels, in order, at the front of the classroom. One at a time, I hold up a panel, show the class, and we briefly discuss the interesting aspects of this depiction.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1: Sample Graphic Novel Depiction



This exercise is beneficial in several ways. It encourages cooperation as students work with one another to read closely, represent the text accurately, and use the space on the small board effectively. Typically, a creative exercise such as this one engages students who might not normally talk in class but are creative or read graphic novels/comic books. Additionally, this exercise encourages students to consider and carefully illustrate some of the more complicated parts of the story, such as the incident discussed below on the “threshing room” floor found in chapter three or the agreement between Boaz and the guardian-redeemer in [4:7-8](#).

## Ruth and Immigration

Having discussed the student-created graphic novel (which I leave up during this discussion and reference later, when appropriate), I ask if any of the panels note the geographical setting of this story. Students easily answer Moab first, and then Bethlehem in Judah. I then ask which characters are Moabite, and students respond both Ruth and Orpah. This begins a discussion of Ruth’s ethnicity as a Moabite ([Powell 2019](#)), her circumstances, the loss of her husband, and her choice to follow Naomi back home to Judah. I display a map ([Society of Biblical Literature 2019](#)) of the region illustrating Moab’s

<sup>2</sup> To use this exercise online, I suggest an whiteboard platform such as [Miro \(2020\)](#), which is free and allows students to collaborate together creating a whiteboard that can be saved as a pdf and shared with the class. The instructor could place the students into breakout rooms and allow them time to create a graphic novel panel to then share with the group.

<sup>3</sup> All online Bible texts link to [BibleGateway \(2020\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> The example included with this article is from my own class. Special thanks to the Spring 2020 Tues/Thurs 11am “Global Perspectives in Scripture” class at Wingate University for allowing me to share their graphic novel panel.

proximity (Routledge 2019) to Judah (to the east of the Dead Sea), while noting scholars are not certain (Jones 2019) of the exact location. As the text makes clear, a Moabite was not an Israelite, and this part of Ruth's identity suggests that she is a foreigner or even an immigrant (Smith-Christopher 2019), as she travels to a place that is not her own, yet is not altogether that far from her home. Again, I allow students to control the direction of the conversation, but recently the conversation inevitably addresses the Mexico-American border and the construction of the "wall." What would have happened if there were a wall between Moab and Judah in the book of Ruth? Did Ruth experience any discrimination because of her ethnicity? Does Boaz expect that Ruth will be sexually harassed (Carasik 2019) because of her identity, as suggested in 2:9? How does it impact political discussions when Ruth the Moabite is identified as an immigrant who crossed a border?

### *Ruth, Sex, and Consent*

"What do you think happened between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing room floor?" (Halton 2019). In order to broach the controversial topic of sex in this narrative, I use a strategy of slow, critical, and reflective reading of the text. I divide the class into small groups (from two to four students), project parts of Ruth chapter three, and deliberately read those parts out loud.<sup>5</sup> I begin with 3:1-5 and ask the students to discuss with their peers, for a couple of minutes, what they think Naomi is telling Ruth to do. Then, I display Ruth 3:6-10, which shows how Ruth acted on her mother-in-law's instructions and how Boaz responded. After another few minutes of small group discussion, I display Ruth 3:11-13 and I also write on the board: HINT: Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This passage gives basic instructions concerning Levirate marriage (Weisberg 2019). I ask the students to discuss what is happening in 3:11-13 while they look up the verses from Deuteronomy as well. During this time, I wander from group to group asking questions and assisting when necessary. After this guided discussion, I bring the dialogue back to the class as a whole. After hearing several students vocalize their thoughts, which often include the idea that Naomi told Ruth to initiate sex with Boaz, I ask: "Is it difficult to imagine that the Bible contains a story of pre-marital sex?" This leads to a discussion about the ways that biblical texts have been used to promote sexual abstinence, purity, gender roles (hierarchical), and heterosexual ("traditional") marriage.<sup>6</sup>

I then steer the conversation into a discussion focused on "intent" and "consent" in the book of Ruth. Here, I again utilize polling software and post the following question:

Who was the initiator of the incident on the threshing room floor?

- Ruth
- Boaz
- Naomi

Using software in this way enables me to display the results on the projector using a chart, allowing the class to see how many students voted for which character as the "initiator." Because this is a sensitive subject, I allow the students to control the conversation and I encourage as many students to talk as possible. This inevitably leads to a diversity of opinions including those who do not think anything sexual or inappropriate happened between Ruth and Boaz that night. The question of "initiator" can be answered without the student deciding what happened on the threshing room floor, which is why it is a thought-provoking question for discussion.

After I show the results of the poll, I ask for someone who voted for Ruth to defend their choice. I do the same with Boaz and then Naomi. In this discussion, many questions arise. Did Boaz invite Ruth's visit? Did Ruth want to visit Boaz? Why did Naomi not go to the threshing room herself? Could Ruth have said "no" to Naomi? What would have happened if Boaz rejected Ruth? In the end, did Boaz propose marriage to Ruth, or did Ruth propose marriage to Boaz through her actions? The lively debate as to who initiated this visit leads naturally into a discussion about gender roles. Typically, in my classes, fewer students vote for Boaz as the initiator (he is likely quite drunk and asleep), and so I ask how this affects his gender role in the impending marriage. Is Boaz viewed as passive in this text? Do the women in the text (Ruth or Naomi) have agency?

<sup>5</sup> If using this strategy online, an instructor using Zoom could place the students into break-out rooms for the brief group discussions.

<sup>6</sup> For a resource engaging these issues in the book of Ruth, see Stephanie Day Powell (2019).

## Why It Is Effective

Beginning with current topics such as feminism encourages students to talk about a political topic they have heard of and have considered previously. Discussing feminism before opening the biblical text allows students to think about this definition without the previously conceived ideas they might have about the Bible and gender, or about the book of Ruth. Creative exercises, such as depicting Ruth as a graphic novel, invite students to read the text closely and inspire artistic students to be involved directly in class discussions. Videos such as the Bechdel test bring the biblical text into a modern context and encourage the students to consider the media they imbibe in their daily or weekly life. Small group discussions in addition to the use of anonymous polling software encourage students to vocalize their own beliefs without the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class. Current political topics such as immigration, sexuality, marriage, gender roles, and feminism can all be examined using this one short, accessible, biblical text.

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