



THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

## SPECIAL TOPIC

## Who Speaks When?

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### ABSTRACT

When one angry student refused to follow my discussion structure in a class on diverse Christian views of gender and sexuality, I was unable to keep other students in the room safe from his harmful tirade. After this student refused to apologize in aggressively disrespectful language to me in a private meeting, I petitioned for university sanction. The student responded to my request for a disciplinary hearing by launching a social media campaign to discredit me and my reasons for requesting this hearing. This awful class and the subsequent related events, including the administrative response to the social media outrage, have led me to a deeper understanding of what it means to embrace responsibility while at the same time recognizing and accepting that I am not in control. This is one of three essays published together in a [special topic section](#) of this journal on critical incidents in the classroom.

### KEYWORDS

transgender, sexuality, feminist pedagogy, Christianity, social media, classroom discipline

In my first year as a tenured associate professor, I experienced the worst class of my life in what I had expected to be a dream course, in both content and format: an upper-level seminar surveying Christian views, historical and contemporary, on the human person, sin, and salvation. While most of my teaching load is large introductory classes which students take to fulfill a core curriculum requirement, this elective course had only about a dozen students. Then, in a nightmare session, one angry student refused to follow my discussion structure and erupted in an angry, hurtful tirade, from which I was unable to keep other students in the room safe. This awful class and subsequent events have led me to a deeper understanding of what it means to embrace responsibility while at the same time recognizing and accepting that I am not in control.

Course material on the human person included an overview of historical Christian teachings that women do not image God as men do, womanist critiques of racism in Christianity, and disability theology on persons with dementia. As we studied contemporary Christian diversity on gender and sexuality, the [Nashville Statement](#), signed by evangelical leaders who assert that “a homosexual or transgender self-conception is inconsistent with God’s holy purpose in creation and redemption” was required reading (Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood 2017, Article VII). The class session devoted to discussing that reading and this position was lively but respectful. The student who upended the next class did not attend this session.

From the first day of the course, a traditional age male student I had never taught before regularly sought to dominate class discussion, when he was present. A pattern had quickly emerged, in which he made extraneous comments unrelated to and demonstrating no familiarity with the assigned reading, in an apparent bid simply to hold the floor. Early in the term, I spoke to him privately in the hall immediately before class, to say I would limit the number of times I acknowledged his desire to speak because I wanted to encourage discussion by some of the quieter members of the small class, which was about evenly male and female. I am a white female and the class was predominantly white, with only two students of color. He laughed and told me to go ahead if I wanted to, but that he had been in classes with many of these students before, and they never talked.

I was taken aback by his reply, but it was time to start class, so I did not respond directly. That conversation did not change the pattern. I settled into a routine of using pair/share discussion structures, largely as a way of limiting time spent in whole class discussions when this student was present. I thought I was being sensitive and might be able to build rapport with him by avoiding direct confrontation, while also not letting his comments dominate class. When he expressed interest in process theology during a class discussion, I brought in one of my books on the topic to loan him. Unfortunately, in hindsight, I think he interpreted my indirect approach as evidence of weakness and perhaps felt emboldened by my nonconfrontational strategies.

Shortly before midterm, in the session immediately following discussion of the Nashville statement, I opened class by playing transgender Christian Reverend Paula Stone Williams's 2017 TEDx talk, in which [she explains](#) how living as a woman has made her aware of sexism in a profoundly new way (Williams 2019).<sup>1</sup> Before showing the video, I explained that we would have a minute of silence after the talk, for students to gather their thoughts. Then, for this session, female students would be invited to respond first, with male student responses afterward. Given the topic, the foundation of previous material, and the class dynamics, I still think it was a good plan.

As it happened, just as I noted the time after the video ended to track a minute for silence, the student I have described launched into scattered comments, the theme of which was denying the reality of everything Williams had just said about her own experience. This included comments to the effect that no one can be a woman just by dressing like one, that Williams deserved to lose all her friends since she had lied to everyone about who she is, that economists have proven there is no gender wage gap, and on and on and on. He was extremely loud, angry, and his face fiery red. While he was speaking, a visibly upset student left the room without a word.

My instinctual response was to regain the floor, thinking I could somehow go forward with my planned discussion on Christian diversity regarding gender and sexuality. But that reflexive response failed for at least two reasons. Firstly, I am soft-spoken; I had to shout to be heard over the student, and it took several attempts. Struggling to be louder than he was, to tell him he was out of order and had to stop immediately, I inadvertently acceded to the tense, hostile, combative atmosphere he had established. Though I thought I was properly asserting my authority, I competed with him for dominance and, in hindsight, wish I had not done so.

Secondly, my attempt to go forward with what I had planned was doomed. This student's rage had shattered any sense of safety in the room. I finally made myself heard, saying that he had to stop speaking or leave the room. He asked if I was telling him he had to leave in such an aggressive and hostile way that it was clearly a threat. Perhaps I should have said yes. As I had been struggling to regain the floor, I considered calling campus police but decided not to, and did not order him to leave. Instead, I replied that if he stayed in the room, he had to comply with my discussion rules. It was his choice. The power battle between the two of us effectively silenced everyone else, and his intense hostility dominated the space even when he stopped speaking. Discussion simply was not possible. But in my determination to establish control, I did not see that. Resolved to show I was in charge, I plowed through the rest of that session. I wish I had not.

It was a late afternoon class, and when I got home that evening after another obligation, I discovered that the student who had silently left the room had emailed me right away through use of a smart phone, while still in the building, to apologize for walking out of class. That email read, in part, that the angry student's "blatant transphobia was putting me on the verge of a panic attack. I didn't feel safe in that classroom." That last sentence cut out my heart.

Until we communicated about this incident I had not known that this student was trans. Not only had I not kept this vulnerable student safe, but they had suffered deep distress because of inappropriate behavior in my class. This student, who had attended every session and was always prepared, who only a few weeks before had approached me after class to say how much they were enjoying the course, felt so unsafe because of this incident that they felt unable to return to the classroom. I received permission from my dean to instruct this student in one-on-one sessions for the remainder of the term, but they did not complete the course, despite my best efforts to keep them engaged and encouraged. They also told me they were not returning to the university after the semester's end. We stayed in touch through email a bit, but not for long. I remain haunted by how I failed this bright, engaging student who certainly has the capacity for a successful undergraduate education.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Williams has since given another TED talk with her son. Both are available at [her website](#) (Williams 2020).

After a great deal of self-reflection, I now regularly rehearse what I wish I had done in that awful class, hoping to inscribe a new reflex. Though it now seems obvious, a strategy suggested to me in a therapy session never occurred to me in the moment. I wish I had waited until the student reached the end of his response to the video (assuming that must have happened at some point). Then, in the first minute of his voluntary silence, I wish I had said something like, “Wow! Now we all know what ‘X’ thinks! But I’d like to know what everyone in the room thinks. Please take out a sheet of paper and write out your responses.”

This strategy would have de-centered the student controlling the space with his anger. I imagine students pouring out their reactions, collecting their papers, and then dismissing class with a comment about responding to what they all said during our next session. I have not been able to imagine that next session, however. Nor have I been able to imagine a scenario in which the trans student feels safe enough to stay in the room through the outburst and reach that opportunity to write out a response. Though I am responsible for what takes place in my classroom, as this experience forcefully brought home to me, I am not in control. However, if I had let go of my insistence on being in control by waiting for the student to run out of things to say, perhaps I could have given the silenced students a safe space in which to respond to the violation of our class atmosphere.

It is not surprising that my sense of responsibility manifested in a reflexive grab for control. The many years I lived by juggling adjunct contracts and then the years leading up to tenure required me to prove myself over and over. The structures of academia insist upon this. For example, my institution requires all non-tenured instructors to be observed twice each semester by two tenured faculty; over many years, I have accumulated a thick stack of observation letters attesting to my teaching ability, the effectiveness of my course design, and various classroom strategies. But all this documentation and explanation of teaching strategies, class plans, and carefully worded policies on syllabi blur distinctions between responsibility and control.

The truth is that no matter how carefully I explain course policies or plan a class session, no matter how conscientious I may be in modeling respectful interaction to create an atmosphere of respect in class, I am not able, finally, to control another adult’s behavior. I see now that for years, I have equated responsibility, maintaining control, and ensuring safety: a powerfully appealing but illusory calculus. When I later discussed this incident and how I wish I had responded at a faculty-only workshop, a male teacher responded by saying, “That would never happen in one of my classes!” No, probably not.

Never mind that the faculty member who made this comment does not teach comparably controversial material. Perhaps more importantly, the professor who made that comment is a white male. The authority of white male professors is not challenged by students as the authority of professors of color and female professors often is, particularly in controversial matters which students may find personally threatening or emotionally upsetting.<sup>2</sup>

A discussion structure stipulating first silence, then female before male response, was a consciously feminist pedagogical strategy in a portion of class studying sexism and challenges to it within Christianity. Only one student chose to reject my authority by demanding to speak first, in open hostility. Significantly, this was a white male.<sup>3</sup> This student had not objected to prior discussion of arguments that women do not image God as fully as men, yet he said I had no right to “force” students to listen to a trans Christian describe her experience. In his comments, the white male student explicitly refused to acknowledge Reverend Williams’s reality.

Subsequent events also quickly took a turn I could not have anticipated or prevented. The angry student and I had a previously scheduled appointment on the morning following the classroom incident, to discuss his research project. When he arrived, I addressed the events of the previous class. I began by asking if he was experiencing any personal circumstance that might be causing him difficulty in managing his emotions, especially anger. He laughed as he said, “No, there’s nothing.”

<sup>2</sup> I draw upon literature analyzing student evaluations to make this assertion, particularly [Mitchell and Martin](#) (2018), MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt (2015), Miller and Chamberlin (2000), and Andersen and Miller (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Though I believe sexual orientation is also relevant to analysis, I limit comment to what I observed directly. For the sake of transparency on the topic of sexuality, I am heterosexual.

I then explained the university academic disciplinary procedures and asked him to acknowledge responsibility for inappropriate behavior with an apology. He refused. He not only felt no apology was necessary, but made comments about me, the course, my department, and the discipline of religious studies which made it clear he had decided to treat me as an adversary and the course as a battle ground. Since we were in my office, I took notes as he spoke, in full view, to document what was said.

Because of the way he refused to acknowledge any inappropriateness in his behavior, I decided to take the next step in the disciplinary process and applied for a hearing to have him removed from the roster. This request required approval by my departmental chair, my college's dean, and the university provost; a hearing board, composed of faculty and students appointed by the provost's office, would then decide whether he remained in or was permanently removed from the course.

Before the hearing date, the student launched a social media campaign claiming that I had violated his free speech. The day of the hearing, the website *Campus Reform* [ran a story](#) repeating the student's claims (Gunter and Devlin 2018) and *Red Ice TV* posted a Henrik [Palmgren interview](#) with the student on its website (Palmgren 2018). The following day, *The Daily Stormer* website posted a link to [an interview](#) with the student by Vincent James, who is associated with *The Red Elephants* site.<sup>4</sup> The night after the hearing, local police knocked at my door after I was in bed to investigate a complaint that I had made a threat of violence against a local church. A few days later, [an interview](#) with the student was aired by Tucker Carlson, which has had two million views (Carlson 2018).

I live in the small-town, rural area in which my regional state university is located, in an open carry state. I had seen openly displayed revolvers on campus long before this event. But now photos of me, my street address, and my home had been posted online, and comments on vile chat sites said I should be raped or shot. I took down my personal Facebook page, but not before it had been flooded with obscenities. My university email was inundated with hateful messages and many other university personnel and departments received vitriolic messaging and phone calls. Campus police made extra rounds on the floor of my department.

Disciplinary hearings are intended to be confidential, and decisions are normally communicated only to the relevant parties. The structure of this hearing provided time for the student and I to each present a statement and respond to each other's statements. I had made my case and waited to hear from the board. I never did. In a press conference ten days after the hearing, the president of my university, without any prior contact with me, [announced](#) that he had "decided to indefinitely pause the formal university process without resolution" (Driscoll 2018). The decision of the hearing board would never be announced. Despite having scrupulously followed all university procedures to ensure responsible behavior, I soon learned just how little control I had in matters of university decision making. The rules changed under my feet with no notice.

Weighing in on matters of free speech in his press conference, the president alluded to a blog post of mine, published two months prior to this incident, which had been weaponized in the media frenzy. When the police came to my home investigating a report that I had made threats against a local church, they had quoted a creative interpretation of one sentence in that blog post. This deliberate misuse of my words lay behind the president's statement that

In a free society, people with opinions you don't like are allowed to exist, are allowed to speak, and can call you names. People are even allowed to write essays that use violent metaphors to describe their feelings about a challenging situation without fear of punishment. (Driscoll 2018)<sup>5</sup>

Evidently, to the president's mind, public shaming of a faculty member did not constitute punishment, because he went on to say, "As I see it, a more thoughtful application of the IUP Way would probably have resulted in a reasonable resolution of the matter, with significantly less anger and anxiety" (Driscoll 2018). He also announced that he had asked "a senior faculty member with significant experience in the First Amendment and a long career as a successful classroom teacher

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4 *The Daily Stormer* link to the video is no longer live, though it [is discussed](#) on the site (Jones 2018). The [same interview](#) was posted at *Red Elephants* YouTube Channel (James 2018).

5 In the [blog post](#) (Downie 2018) I had used the rather unfortunate metaphor of a Molotov cocktail; unfortunate in that it is shop worn. If only I had known how well cited this metaphor would be, perhaps I would have found a more original expression. The blog dealt with the internal experience of anger, shame, and the effort to process these.

to join the class as a monitor and a mentor for all” (Driscoll 2018). Predictably, once this white male professor/monitor (or my babysitter, as he was later called in various media) was in the room, the formerly disruptive student never again made extraneous comments unrelated to the course or attempted to dominate class discussion, no matter how controversial the material.<sup>6</sup>

It was made clear to me that if I complied with administrative decisions about handling this public relations nightmare, all would go well. The implication was, I understood just as clearly, that should I speak publicly about this matter without proper vetting, I would not be protected by university legal counsel, should the various lawsuits threatened by many, who also claimed to have deep pockets, be forthcoming.

The dynamics of one class session, during which one hostile voice dominated the classroom, was intentionally replicated and amplified across various social media, gaining absurd embellishments, distortions, and outright fabrications from the start, all predicated upon the assumed narrative that I had unfairly silenced this student because of a personal agenda. Not only was I unable to control what was being said about me, I was also unable to talk back without risking my job and/or bankruptcy by potential legal fees.

I believed it was responsible to choose silence, for a time. That grueling choice has taken more of a toll on me than the threats, mockery, falsehoods, and vicious emails, which I still occasionally receive.<sup>7</sup> As I see it, now that it is not likely I will be fired or bankrupted by a lawsuit, (though I could be mistaken), my responsibility has shifted to speaking about these events.<sup>8</sup>

The scholarship of teaching and learning represents a community discussion to me, a dialogue which has enriched and strengthened me as an educator and as a person. I benefit greatly from the classroom stories, pedagogical reflections, and tactics others share and expect to continue to do so. Some would counsel that I leave this story behind and move on. Why exhume a painful past? Some will not understand that I need to speak about this event precisely so that I can move on. Though this happened to me, the story is not only personal. The personal and private is also the public and the political.

More than a year after this ordeal, I enjoy the privilege of a comfortably anonymous middle-class life. With tenure, I no longer worry about whether I will get a teaching contract or have health insurance. I regained the pounds I lost when I could not eat or sleep normally for weeks. I no longer fear a brick through my living room window or an unknown number lighting up my phone. I can buy groceries without fearing I will be accosted by an outraged Breitbart reader who thinks I pose an imminent danger to all local Christians. I can park in a faculty lot without fearing my tires will be slashed or my car egged. This routinely assumed relative safety is a privilege denied not only to those who have been fired or forced out of the classroom by social media campaigns, but also to veiled Muslim women and turbaned Sikhs, to Jews, to immigrants, to those with visible disabilities, to all persons of color, to LGBTQ persons, and the list goes on.

In graduate school I came across a statement by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in an anthology of his writings, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1996), which unnerved and frustrated me. It made me deeply uncomfortable and for a long time I found it baffling. I have been chewing on it for nearly two decades: “In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible” (1996, 225). Though I expect to continue having difficulty assessing and addressing my guilt, even if or when I am not guilty, and, I would add, even when I am not in control, I am responsible. I hope I demonstrated responsibility by not speaking for a time, but now I believe responsibility entails speaking.

6 It is important, though digressive to the flow of this essay, that I stress my enormous respect for and undying gratitude to this generous colleague, who spent countless hours supporting me. The incident occurred at midterm, so a great deal of the semester remained. Indeed, once I learned that the student was to remain in the course, I was deeply grateful for this professor’s presence, which enabled me to feel safe in the classroom. I must also thank so many in my campus community. My department chair issued a letter of support for me. The dean of my college signed a statement of support that all the chairs of every department in my college wrote and distributed through university email. The director of the women’s and gender studies program, as well as the campus chapter of the faculty union to which I belong also issued statements of their support of me to the entire university through email. I am also deeply thankful to each of my departmental colleagues, our administrative assistant, student office workers, and to the many people on campus who supported and encouraged me with personal notes. Though I was entirely off social media, I know that many also supported me in personal postings on Twitter and Facebook. I also must thank Paula Stone Williams for her gracious, generous support and for agreeing to speak at our campus the following semester for a nominal fee. It was a great pleasure to meet her and an honor to bring her to our campus.

7 These are now sporadic and unpredictable. I happened to receive about a dozen while I wrote this essay. A [petition to have me fired](#) continues to accumulate signatures, more than 2,000 on May 29, 2019 (Player 2018).

8 I am grateful to others who discussed these events when I could not, including [David P. Gushee](#) (2018), President of the American Academy of Religion, and [Michael Vasquez](#) (2018).

Being the target of outrage for several weeks has given me a fleeting taste of what it might be to live with a constant sense of threat from people who despise without knowing me, people who are outraged and threatened by my very existence. Though the event was short-lived, the caricature of me that lives online will outlive me. Though the event was short-lived, my increased awareness of privilege must not be. And though I am not in control, if I am to be responsible, the ordeal which initiated my tenure must also direct how I use the privilege accorded by tenure to speak.

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#### ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL TOPIC SECTION ON CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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