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TEACHING OUTSIDE YOUR FIELD

Learning to Swim: How to Survive in the Deep End of Unfamiliar Course Material

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ABSTRACT

As institutions of higher learning increasingly rely on contingent faculty members to carry the load of required courses, more and more new contingent faculty find themselves thrown into the "deep end" of teaching in areas outside of their fields. By focusing on broader learning goals, appealing to the power of story, and emphasizing real-life application by incorporating experiential learning, these faculty members can make almost any course feel like a course they are qualified to teach. Furthermore, they can allow their wonder at learning new material inspire students to embrace unfamiliar topics as well.

KEYWORDS

general education, lifelong learning, experiential learning, undergraduate education

When I first interviewed for the adjunct position at the Christian liberal arts university where I now teach full-time, my dean informed me that I would be teaching a course called Understanding the Bible. I gently reminded him that I was a systematic theologian, and that I had not taken a Bible course in about eight years. He seemed unconcerned and assured me that I, at least, knew more than my eighteen-year-old students would know, so I would be fine. Needless to say, I entered the classroom that fall with much trepidation! It felt like getting thrown into the deep end of a pool before anyone had taught me how to swim.

I still teach Understanding the Bible almost every semester, and it has become my favorite course to teach. I rarely teach courses that are squarely within my field, spending most of my time teaching Bible or world religions. I have found that focusing on broader learning goals, appealing to the power of story, and emphasizing real-life application by incorporating experiential learning are three strategies that can make any course, no matter how unfamiliar the subject matter, feel like a course one is qualified to teach.

Focus on Broader Learning Goals

Every college student needs to learn transferable skills like the ability to engage in close reading of a text; the ability to distinguish reliable information from unreliable information; the ability to think critically about an idea; the ability to discuss and disagree about topics respectfully and in an informed way; the ability to collaborate; and the ability to present information in front of a group. Furthermore, students need to learn habits of mind like epistemological humility and resilience. These skills have become increasingly valuable in an age of machine learning and artificial intelligence. As Randy Bass has put it, "As machines get better at being machines, the primary purpose of higher education has to be to help humans get better at being human" (2019).[1] This is the task of the teacher.

Anyone who has successfully completed a graduate program, particularly one in a humanities field, has the capacity to teach these skills. It is possible to use just about any subject as a vehicle for the development of these abilities. Assignments and activities that enable students to practice these skills are a good way to set course content in a broader context of lifelong learning.

Close Reading

Many days in my Understanding the Bible course look like "Bible book club," in which students and I engage in a close reading of a passage and discuss it together. This practice is especially helpful for those moments when students are bringing particular interpretations to the text without realizing that there are multiple ways a passage can be (and has been) understood. For example, we spend quite a lot of time on the first three chapters of Genesis, and a close reading together reveals that neither the word "sin" nor the word "fall" appears there. This opens up a discussion about interpretation, translation, and theological anthropology that would not have been possible without time spent closely attending to the text itself.

Distinguishing Reliable from Unreliable Information

The task of determining what information on the Internet is reliable and trustworthy is increasingly difficult. Any course can be an opportunity to help students develop information literacy—and this is a perfect opportunity to enlist the help of university library staff. Perhaps a librarian can do an in-class workshop on the research process, finding and assessing scholarly sources, or moving from research to an outline. This approach has the added benefit of modeling the academic virtue of intellectual generosity, making the classroom a space where the primary instructor is the host, rather than the lone expert.

Discussion and Disagreement

Because I teach religion courses to students whose views are all over the theo-political map, I anticipate that disagreements will come up and that students will sometimes feel uncomfortable. To that end, on the first or second day of class I crowd-source from students a series of "conversation commitments" we can make to each other that we can reference whenever tense moments arise. Some of these include:

- Try to be curious instead of defensive.
- Avoid starting sentences with "I don't know how *anyone* could believe _____."
- Be prepared to fail at these commitments sometimes, and have grace with each other when we do.

1 See also the studies from the Strada Institute for the Future of Work (2018), on preparing people to be "robot-ready" and detailing how STEM fields and the liberal arts are both necessary for this preparation.

Since students have helped generate the list, they feel some ownership over the classroom environment, and they feel empowered to help shape conversations in accordance with the ways we've promised to try to interact with each other. They provide guidelines on which we can fall back when we hit an impasse in the moment on a theological, ethical, or political issue.

Collaboration and Communication

In almost all of my courses, a group project and/or presentation are part of the grade. I usually assign students to their groups early in the semester, so they have a core set of other students to rely on for support, encouragement, note-taking when someone has to miss class, et cetera. I then have students present their projects at the end of the semester. In my Understanding the Bible course, I have students craft a story in the spirit of *midrash,* faithfully filling in a gap they find in any part of the biblical text. Then, they shape this story into a creative form—I have had students perform skits, write songs, create music videos, and engage the class in games they have invented, among other things. This project not only builds camaraderie among students and emphasizes the communal nature of biblical interpretation, it also encourages them to view the text in a way that is new for most of them and opens up the way they read.

Appeal to the Power of Story

Even though I am not a biblical scholar, I am, by virtue of having a graduate education, a good reader of texts who can help students extract relevant themes from biblical narratives. In a religiously diverse classroom environment, not everyone is committed to reading the Bible for devotional purposes, and many students have come away from encounters with the text (and the people who wield it) with emotional scars. Regardless of whether or not a particular student views the biblical text as authoritative, however, anyone can appreciate a rich, complex narrative. Similarly, in courses on world religions, focusing on meaningful narratives rather than on particular truth claims yields productive discussion and teachable moments of critical thinking. One cannot help but appreciate the beauty of another person's religious tradition when confronted with its sacred stories, even if one is not inclined to appreciate such things.

Along these same lines, I have found it valuable to assign good stories—novels and memoirs—as additional textbooks to complement the primary material. Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* (1967) or Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (1997) can help students access ideas about hermeneutics and interpretive communities in a way that simply reading the Bible itself cannot. Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016) helped a class of world religions students talk about loss, grief, and what comes after life for various kinds of religious believers. Austin Channing Brown's *I'm Still Here* (2018) helped third-year religion students understand the effects of anti-black racism within the church in a way that statistics about hate crimes never could. Novels and memoirs, especially, seem less intimidating than the primary sources of sacred texts and the more scholarly texts I assign. They also promote empathy and vulnerability, and they pave the way for students to share their own stories. Texts like these offer a quick way to establish a sense of community and get everyone on the same "team" as we wrestle with fraught topics.

Sometimes the affective dimension of teaching and learning religion can get lost in the effort of content delivery. Encountering new ways of interpreting sacred texts or discussing deeply held beliefs can be jarring, intimidating, or off-putting, depending on each student's background, and emotional reactions are very real and often very strong. Stories can make these new ideas and approaches seem less threatening, and can invite students to reflect on the aspects of their own experiences that have contributed to their ways of reading and interpreting. It is easy to reject a scholarly interpretation with which one does not agree (or which one does not quite understand), but it is difficult to argue with someone's experience.

Emphasize Real-Life Application by Incorporating Experiential Learning

Students want to know that their classwork will pay off in "real life" (though I would, and they might, quibble with the common assumption that being in college does not constitute real life!). It may not always be the case that they are learning what they view as marketable skills in their religion courses, but it is possible to demonstrate how learning the material can make them better citizens of whatever part of the world they inhabit. Field trips, guest speakers, and service-learning projects are some excellent ways to accomplish this goal.

Field Trips and Guest Speakers

In some of my Bible classes, we visit a local synagogue to augment our understanding of the significance of Torah and to give my predominantly Christian (or at least Christian-informed) students the chance to hear from their Jewish neighbors about not only their tradition but also their experiences of anti-Semitism. Students come away from these encounters eager to share what they have heard with their families and friends, to debunk stereotypes, and to be in solidarity with their neighbors who experience discrimination. The same thing happens when we visit a Hindu temple, a gurudwara, and a mosque in my world religions course, or when I have representatives from these communities come as guest speakers. Many institutions have funds available (either in particular academic department budgets or through other university offices) to provide honorariums for guest speakers, and adjuncts can find out if these funds are available to them.

Service-Learning

In one course I teach, I have students complete ten hours of service-learning with partner agencies around our city. At many institutions, service-learning is a graduation requirement, and one need not be a full-time faculty member to incorporate this requirement into a course. Adjuncts can find out if their employing institutions have an office of service-learning that can connect them with partner agencies with whom students can volunteer. Service-learning can help themes of a course come to life. To highlight the importance of table fellowship for the early church and Jesus' care for poor and hungry people, I have students work with agencies that address food insecurity. Students bring insights back into the classroom from their experiences serving in food banks, soup kitchens, and organizations that help people access SNAP benefits. A colleague has his students serve with an agency that aids recently arrived immigrants and refugees, as part of his efforts to emphasize the theme of wandering far from home that permeates the biblical texts.

Lifelong Learning: Let Your Wonder Show!

One of the most important tasks of the faculty member who teaches undergraduates is to demonstrate what lifelong learning looks like. Because I am often encountering ideas and texts for the first time alongside my students, the awe and wonder I feel at learning something new is genuine. I have learned not to be afraid of letting that wonder show. It is often the case (and I tell my students this) that I feel I learn more from them than they do from me.

The strategies I have outlined above are not a substitute for having a decent grasp on enough of the material to be able to teach it. They are, however, a way to focus on what one already knows how to do well, and use those things as the delivery method for unfamiliar subject matter.

I never feel as if I have exhausted the subjects I teach—I always have more to learn, so the students always have more to learn, and my energy stays fresh each semester. Rather than being a hindrance, teaching unfamiliar topics has largely been a gift.

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