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Accepting the Inevitability of Politics in the Classroom: A Proposal for How to Identify Best Practices in Effective and Inclusive Religious Studies Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Once we acknowledge that we cannot escape politics in the classroom, it is imperative that we, as instructors, adapt our pedagogy accordingly, with the knowledge that our choices in the classroom will replicate, reinforce, or resist the political status quo. The political embeddedness of religion makes this all the more urgent for instructors of religious studies, as we attempt to guide students through explorations of communities, identities, histories, ideologies, and representations of human experience which all have political implications in the present. This article delineates several parameters for crafting our pedagogical initiatives, offering classroom climate considerations to keep in mind while we establish our own best practices. It then offers several suggestions—structural, instructor-focused, and student-focused—of best practices to implement in the religious studies classroom so as to achieve optimal learning outcomes for all of our students. Key among our conclusions is that inclusive pedagogy is effective pedagogy in religious studies.

KEYWORDS

inclusive pedagogy, politics, inductive pedagogy, safe spaces, classroom climate

Introduction

At the heart of pedagogy is the idea that we must recognize the needs of our students, meeting them where they are, so to speak, so that we can guide them toward more expansive knowledge. This guiding function is embedded in the term's etymology—in ancient Greece and Rome a *paedagogos* (Greek for "child-leader") was an enslaved person whose role was to accompany young students to school, making sure they arrived safely and attended to their studies. To meet students where they are, to recognize them, and listen to them properly, we need to be sensible of the power dynamics at play within our

institutions and classrooms.[1] To successfully guide them to more expansive knowledge and safeguard their access to mastery of our material, we must be prepared to implement strategies for navigating these power dynamics in ways that include all of our students in classroom success. In other words, in order to be effective instructors, we must acknowledge the presence of politics in our classrooms.

As Gibbons and Fruchtman (2020) elaborate in their article in this issue, we cannot avoid politics in the classroom. Instructors are not faced with the question of whether or not to introduce the political into our classes; rather, we are faced with the question of how to deal with the ways that politics are already present. Whatever our field, whatever the class we are teaching, there remains the human reality that we and our students are political creatures, and that what we choose to do in class will replicate, reinforce, or resist the political status quo.[2]

For instructors in religious studies, this truth is particularly important to acknowledge, given the outsize roles religion and the history of religion have come to play in public discourse. Many of us, indeed, find this political embeddedness appealing: we study what we study because of the salience of these topics to human lives, past and present. But we study them, and our expertise brings with it several important insights that we must do our best to impart to our students. We know, for instance, that the situation on the ground is always far more complicated than any one narrative can encapsulate. As scholars of human history, we also know that constructions of history reflect and shape contemporary concerns—that our sources reflect the times in which they were written, rather than the times they represent: we know there is no such thing as going to the archives and reconstructing an unbiased history "as it really was" (Clark 2004). Finally, as scholars of human groups, we know that constructions of religion likewise reflect and shape contemporary concerns—for instance the answers to definitional questions like "Who is 'Christian'?" "What counts as 'orthodox'?" and "Who gets to define what 'Islam' is?" can only be (even partially) answered by "It depends who is asking and why."

To be effective guides to (and advocates for) our field, our methods, and our subjects of study, we need our students to leave our classes not just with knowledge about human cultures and history, but with the intellectual resources required to critically evaluate any new information that presents itself; we need them to be able to articulate objections to harmful misrepresentations of religion and history and to have the tools to engage and correct those who would promote such misconceptions; and we need them to leave our classes wanting to learn more, inclined toward "critical inquiry and analysis of both the other and the self" (AAR-Teagle Working Group 2008, 21-23). Doing justice to our field, to our subjects of study (many of whom can no longer speak for themselves), and indeed to our own expertise requires that we facilitate our students' ability to interrogate sources, to recognize that every reading of texts or historical events is interpretation, to appreciate complexity, nuance, the elliptical and contingent nature of human truth, and the multiplicity of narrative, and to attempt to approach our sources with empathy as well as suspicion.

With so much at stake for our students and our subject areas, so much crucial content to convey, and so many necessary skills to impart, it is vital that we pursue best practices for navigating politics in our pedagogy. If we want to ensure that our students engage with and absorb our field's critical skills and content, we must craft our content choices, design our courses, and establish standards of discourse for our classrooms in ways that take politics into account. Politically responsible course design would, ideally, enable two interrelated outcomes: not only would instructors improve our ability to convey our subject matter and methodologies to our students effectively, but our students would also benefit from feeling included in scholarly conversations, finding themselves inspired and invigorated by their engagement in our classrooms and confident enough to make our material their own.

This article attempts to sketch some of these best practices, and to show that, indeed, being effective teachers requires being inclusive—and this means attending to the politics already enmeshed in our classroom environments. First, we establish the contours of what "best" means in this context, exploring three considerations about classroom climate that provide parameters for assessing whether our pedagogical strategies are effectively addressing politics in the classroom. We then describe and discuss several practices that meet these criteria, illustrating them, primarily, with classroom examples from our own subfield, religion in late antiquity. Though the examples of content are largely specific to late antiquity, both the skills we seek to inculcate in our students and the considerations that we must take into account as we revisit our pedagogy are broadly applicable across the field of religious studies.

1 Gonzalez-Andrieu (2015) reminds us that we also need to be aware of the larger structural dynamics that have already conditioned students' presence in the classroom.

2 For a fuller discussion of the expansive understanding of "politics" we are employing here and the impossibility of an "apolitical" classroom, please see the discussion in Upson-Saia and Doerfler (2020) and Gibbons and Fruchtman (2020) in this issue

Classroom Climate Considerations: The Metric of "Best Practices"

Taking politics into account as we craft our content choices, design our courses, and establish discursive standards for our classrooms is no simple task: it is fraught with possible pitfalls (pedagogical, interpersonal, and, yes, political). Successfully incorporating politics into the college classroom requires that we strike several balances at once: we need to recognize marginalized groups in the classroom without retrenching their marginalization; we need to preserve freedom of expression while maintaining the safety of the classroom for diverse expression; and we must guide our students without dictating to them.[3] We, the authors, suggest that these three balances should form the metric by which we can evaluate what actually constitutes best practices in our field for responsibly incorporating politics into our classrooms.

Consideration 1: Politically Marginalized Groups in the College Classroom

Our classrooms are more diverse than ever. Nontraditional students, returning veterans, undocumented immigrants, and students of every race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, linguistic tradition, neurotype, ability status, national origin, political affiliation, educational background, and religious background show up in our classrooms.[4] "There is no longer a 'typical' college student" (Booker and Campbell-Whatley 2018, 23). It would be simply ineffective to presume homogeneity and shared experiences on any level, even if we teach at parochial institutions or those with specialized missions. But more saliently, many of the students in our classrooms are members of groups that have experienced systemic oppression in America, the consequences of which persist regardless of the privilege of the individual student: they do not see themselves or their histories reflected in our syllabi; they are constantly subjected to microaggressions and silencing tactics; they are burdened by the additional weights of having to represent their identity group, having to prove the validity of their existence, and having to navigate a world that was not only not built for them but built to exclude them, all of which combines to dehumanize them and silence them further.[5] To fail to acknowledge this reality in the classroom is to reinforce and reinscribe the oppressive structures that have marginalized our students' communities in the first place. To teach in a color-blind fashion is to ignore the realities of our students' lives and experiences: no matter how much we want to say that we are all "just human," we live in a world that treats us differently based on what type of human we happen to be, and these differentiations must be dealt with (Boler and Zembylas 2003). Any best practice must acknowledge the reality that certain groups are politically marginalized in our society, and must actively seek to address that marginalization. Crucially, we must do this without tokenizing our students, assuming to know their experiences of discrimination or reducing them to their membership in an identity group.

Consideration 2: "Free Speech" and "Safe Spaces" in the College Classroom

With TurningPointUSA and other organizations militating for a radically permissive understanding of free speech on college campuses and with, simultaneously, a growing recognition that student learning outcomes are negatively affected by secondary traumas triggered in the classroom, feelings of alienation or lack of belonging, and microaggressions (all of which highlight the need for continually considering our students' emotional and psychological well-being),[6] the conflict between "free speech" and "safe spaces" seems to be at a fever pitch. Thankfully, in this case, the poles are not as extreme as they are often portrayed to be, at least in the classroom: shouting opinions for the sake of shouting is just as counterproductive to learning as is avoiding all mention of potentially inflammatory topics. The balance we must strike here, as instructors, is to encourage (as much as possible) our students to express themselves and to work through ideas on their own, in accordance with their own values and insights, but also to ensure (again, as

3 For a complementary discussion of classroom climate and positionality, see Gibbons and Fruchtman (2020) in this issue, as they harness considerations of power dynamics in the classroom to redefine how we and our students can understand politics (in the classroom and beyond).

4 For the status of racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion in American college classrooms, as well as the implications and prospects of this trend, see U.S. Department of Education (2016). For numerical data on gender, ability status, ages, veteran status, and ethnicity/race, see: https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98. As Lee, Poch, Shaw, and Williams note, "The students who attend our colleges and universities increasingly reflect the broad array of national and global diversity" (2012, 2).

5 The benefits of culturally responsive and inclusive curricula have been well documented (see especially Dee and Penner 2017), as have the consequences of monocultural curricula (see Harris and Reynolds 2014), but monocultural representation still predominates and diversity initiatives are often embattled and belittled (see Smith 2018; Gay 2004). Scholars, as a general rule, seem to be reluctant to rethink our canons. On microaggressions and silencing tactics, see Sue et al. (2008) and Berk (2017a, 2017b, and 2017c); on the burden of representation, see Watson et al. (2002, 67-70), Walls and Hall (2018), and Fries-Britt and Turner (2002); on white supremacy in the classroom, see Yacavone (2018); for how the histories we recount are white supremacist; and see Green (2016) and Steele (1992) for how the structures of our universities and classrooms themselves uphold white supremacy. In general, see Shorter-Goodin (2013) as well as Harper and Davis (2016) and the sources they recommend.

6 See Crumpton (2017, 138) and Fenner (2018, 88-89) on secondary trauma negatively affecting student outcomes; see Booker (2016), Booker and Campbell-Whatley (2018), and Osterman (2000) on belonging and student performance; and see Berk and his sources on how microaggressions "create feelings of isolation, exclusion, loneliness, and tokenism" and "lower the individual's work productivity and problem-solving abilities" (2017a, 68).

much as possible) that every student feels safe in our classrooms—to express themselves, certainly, but also to be in a dynamic and respectful classroom where they do not have to worry about their humanity being called into question during the course of a discussion.

This is eminently achievable—the reason that "free speech" and "safe spaces" have, to this point in our discussion, been placed in scare quotes is that real classroom safe spaces are spaces that are safe *for* free speech, ones that provide an atmosphere in which difficult topics can be discussed openly by all students. As Holley and Steiner (building on Boostrom 1998) describe, the safe classroom "allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. . . . [C]lassroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm" (2005, 50). Importantly, the safe classroom is not one without challenge or discomfort.[7] As Holley and Steiner note, "[b]eing safe is not the same as being comfortable. To grow and learn, students must often confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe" (2005, 50). This is not to say we should wantonly disregard our students' emotional and psychological states in the name of challenging them.[8] We need to do the work of making students feel secure enough and supported enough in our classrooms to respond to the challenges we and their classmates present, and this might require things like establishing guidelines for class discussions, structured reflection, grounding exercises, and even (the much-maligned) content warnings (Wyatt 2016; Crumpton 2017).[9] It will certainly require self-reflection on the part of the instructor (see Byron 2012, 118).

Thus, while creating a safe classroom climate is achievable, it is neither easy nor simple to do. It requires that we as instructors actively cultivate a classroom environment that is supportive enough to allow free speech, where every student feels like a full, valued, and respected member of the classroom community at all times.

Consideration 3: Deductive vs. Inductive Pedagogy: Telling vs. Teaching

Research shows that students learn best through active learning—engaging with material through discussions, in-class activities, collaborative projects, and constructive (rather than recitative) assessment exercises, so that students "become participants in constructing their own knowledge" (Murphy Paul 2015). But even within the active learning framework, we know that long-term, transformative learning is best achieved through inductive pedagogy: rather than telling students a principle and having them exercise it (the deductive method), instructors challenge students to address a specific problem or issue and then intervene when students recognize the need for "facts, skills, and conceptual understanding" (Prince and Felder 2007, 14; Brown et al. 2014).[10] We should strive, then, to use inductive methods in our classes wherever possible. However, this is not without risk, particularly in the religious studies classroom.

One challenge for using inductive pedagogy in the religious studies classroom comes from the fact that our subject matter largely consists of people and their practices and beliefs. Thus, when students make the mistakes and missteps inherent to (and essential for) inductive learning, they are making mistakes about people—some of whom may even be represented in the classroom. As we exercise our analytical techniques and exorcise our ignorance in religious studies, then, we run a greater-than-usual risk of contributing to the otherization and alienation of class members who affiliate in any number of ways with the people, practices, and beliefs under discussion.

7 See also Boler (1999) and Boler and Zembylas (2003) on the "pedagogy of discomfort": "To engage in critical inquiry often means asking students to radically reevaluate their worldviews. This process can incur feelings of anger, grief, disappointment, and resistance, but the process also offers students new windows on the world: to develop the capacity for critical inquiry regarding the production and construction of differences gives people a tool that will be used over their lifetime" (Boler and Zembylas 2003, 111). As Winnifred Fallers Sullivan noted on accepting the AAR's 2017 Martin E. Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion, "Going to school is a dangerous thing" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=XxtbUAiJ4cg at 1:03:18). Also helpful is the notion of Callan (2016) distinguishing between "intellectual safety" (where one's ideas go unchallenged) and "dignity safety" (where, despite disagreements, all parties understand one another as equals).

8 While much public comment has focused on the damage we do to students by "coddling" them and not exposing them to the source of their fears (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015), we as instructors need to recognize that we are not our students' doctors; it is neither our job nor our right to declare that by avoiding content warnings we are acting therapeutically. See Wyatt (2016) for a good discussion of the ethical uses of trigger warnings, and Crumpton's (2017) view of content warnings as hospitality.

9 The authors concur with Fenner that content warnings should be understood as "tools to facilitate access to challenging material, rather than excuses to avoid it" (2018, 86) and Penny (2014) that "a trigger warning is not a rule, it's a tool. It does not demand that we withdraw from topics that are taboo or traumatic, but rather suggests that we approach such topics with greater empathy, greater awareness that not everyone reads the same way."

10 As an example, see the Teaching Tactic by Park (2020), in this issue, in which students are asked to research and then, in a "Town Hall" setting, present the hermeneutical positions of disparate biblical interpreters. By making much of the research of a solo or small group activity and by checking in with students frequently, Park allows for inductive learning, while still maintaining the classroom as a safe space for free inquiry.

Another challenge for aspiring to inductive pedagogy in religious studies is that, often, the traditions students are making mistakes about are their own. Indeed, the risk of proliferating unknown unknowns is particularly acute in religious studies classrooms where students often arrive assuming that they, as practitioners of a tradition, unproblematically know its truths. Well versed as practitioners, they may not recognize a need for intervention, not realizing that their assumptions are not universally shared or unproblematically true. The facts, skills, and conceptual understandings their instructors aim to convey would never hold the requisite urgency for inductive learning, because the student might never be confronted with the inadequacy of their received information and logic.[11]

A final challenge is that, in the event of our students *not* coming to academically defensible conclusions, missing the insights we, as instructors, had hoped they would come to about the diversity and otherness of the traditions we are studying, there are both too few and too many real-world consequences. A chemistry student who failed to absorb an instructor's intended lesson might see their experiment fail: they would know they had missed a step somewhere and need to go back to correct it. There are no such tangible, reflection-mandating consequences for misunderstanding material in religious studies. Rather, the consequences of such misunderstanding may be far-reaching and vastly destructive, but may never impinge on a student's consciousness as they head off into the world with toxic misunderstandings of people in their communities and, in the worst-case scenario, the belief that our discipline endorses those misguided understandings.

Whatever best practices we develop must allow for inductive learning by our students, while still buffering the classroom community from the missteps necessary for inductive learning and while ensuring as much as possible that our students' final takeaways fall within an academically acceptable range of understanding.

Suggested Best Practices

If we can meet the standards outlined in the foregoing classroom climate considerations, we stand to gain not only a more positive classroom experience for more of our students, but also a greater level of efficacy in teaching our subjects. Students who feel encouraged, engaged, and valued in class will invest more energy in learning the material, will make more connections between the material and their contemporary lives, and will be more likely to treat the material with a nuanced eye. Being inclusive—which means actively acknowledging the role of politics in the classroom—allows us to be more effective instructors.

There are many strategies instructors can employ to help us meet these standards. The following suggestions are certainly not meant to be exhaustive.[12] Rather, they are illustrative of the types of decisions we can make as instructors to better serve our students and our areas of study. For clarity's sake, we have broken these suggestions into three (somewhat artificial) categories: those that focus on the structure or design of the course, those that focus on instructor behavior in the classroom, and those that focus on fostering and utilizing student agency in the classroom.

1. Structural Solutions

Course designs are a particularly effective venue for incorporating political reality into our teaching. Not only do they put our acknowledgement of politics into active, explicit practice that shapes every moment of student course contact, they are structures that we can craft prior to the semester's start and on our own, allowing instructors to preserve their time and safeguard their emotional reserves during the semester.

A. Choosing Content: Diversity and Relevance

Perhaps the most fundamental structural strategy we can adopt is to keep political concerns in mind as we choose our course content. When choosing primary sources, we can choose texts and material evidence that represent an expansive and inclusive range of historical realities. When choosing secondary sources, we can seek out and select for class use excellent scholarship by women and people of color as well as by people with diverse political and methodological agendas. When choosing what topics to include in our

11 See, for instance, the types of epistemological assumptions that Karapanagiotis (2017) describes her students holding, as they enter her world religions classroom with the intention of becoming Christian missionaries.

12 For a wealth of additional ideas and suggestions, see the Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC) site at hastac.org. Thanks to Dr. Dorothy Kim for this and many other references.

classes, we can help prepare our students for real world interactions by selecting topics that are at the forefront of public discourse, and also can demonstrate the possibilities and relevance of scholarly engagement by assigning and discussing public scholarship.

Selecting diverse source material is not only politically responsible, it is necessary if we want to do justice to our subject areas. Religion is, after all, "largely created by its adherents" (AAR-Teagle Working Group 2008, 21), which is to say, by people. Scholars of religion in late antiquity can no longer sustain the illusion that the only people who existed or mattered were elite clerics whom later tradition identified as orthodox or that the ideas endorsed by the powerful and privileged were the only ones to have ever existed, or were the only "viable" options on the table. No course on the Bible can responsibly talk about the formation of biblical canons without reference to and readings from books that did not make it.[13] Now that we have the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, for instance, there is no excuse for only reading Eusebius's *Church History* or Irenaeus's heresiology. Our students tend to easily grasp the principle that history is written by the winners, but we need to disrupt several related and often unarticulated assumptions: that winners and losers can ever be discretely defined,[14] that "winning" implies superiority rather than historical accident,[15] that only winners write histories,[16] and that the winners' histories are the only histories that matter.

We also need to disrupt the equally pernicious and pervasive illusion that white, male voices represent the only real, legitimate, or neutral scholarship. As Perlow, Bethea, and Wheeler note, "Whereas the bodies of white male professors, their curricula (i.e., works by 'great white men') and pedagogies are normalized, naturalized, and neutralized, those of women and racially minoritized professors are marked as politicized representations of the Other" (2014, 243).[17] Bringing in the voices of women and scholars from historically marginalized groups will not only help us begin to correct the racism and sexism entrenched in our institutions and fields of study, it will also improve our teaching and awareness of current scholarship, necessitating as it does the continual reconsideration of the sources we assign.

In addition to diversifying the positionalities of the scholars we cite and assign, we can diversify our sources' media of distribution. If we ask our students to read public scholarship—for example, Sarah Bond's articles in *Forbes*, essays and reviews in Marginalia of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the independent *Ancient Jew Review*, or even Twitter threads by scholars such as Megan Goodwin, Wil Gafney, and Nyasha Junior, who routinely collate and amplify scholarship while adding to it in thought-provoking ways[18]—in addition to works available only in print or behind a paywall, we not only demonstrate to them that good scholarship comes in many forms and couched in a variety of institutional relationships, we also model for them how public discourse can be elevated by thoughtful, evidence-based research and sophisticated argumentation.

The aim of diversifying our sources, importantly, is not to offer token appeasements to students whose constitutive identities we assume we know. It is, rather, to reach beyond our received "canons" for illuminating sources that disrupt default assumptions of elite authority, exposing students to the real diversity of lived experience. When such sources are not available, we must name and foreground the reasons they are not.[19]

Content choices can help us address all of our classroom climate considerations. Our syllabi and reading lists establish the frame of the class, giving us control over much of the direction of the class while not appearing to infringe on our students' autonomy: after all, every class has a syllabus, and every semester we must make hard choices about what to include. This control does not

13 For class exercises on the New Testament canon formation with the use of non-canonical writings, see Byron (2005) and Cobb (2005). For creative teaching tools for the topic of canon formation, see McGrath (2016) and Dalton (2017).

14 For an excellent and clear discussion of this (as well as the assumption that "winning" implies superiority), see Brakke (2010, 7-18) as he problematizes the "horse-race" analogy of early Christian diversity.

15 The vagaries of manuscript survival, for example, are legendary. The dramatic discovery of the so-called "Nag Hammadi Library," which had been buried in a sealed jar in a cave in the fourth century only to be discovered in 1945 by an Egyptian farmer (see Goodacre [2013] and Denzey Lewis and Blount [2014]), is a story that most instructors of late antiquity include in our classes. The Derveni Papyrus and *Beowulf* are two more examples, though not late antique. The Derveni Papyrus failed to fully immolate in a funeral pyre and gifted us our oldest extant papyrus scroll (Most 1997, 117). The sole known copy of *Beowulf*, which had been catalogued incorrectly and forgotten by all before being first happily defenestrated during a fire in 1731, was then accidentally rediscovered by an Icelandic historian fifty years later (see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008, xxv-xxvii).

16 See, for instance, the "hidden transcripts" through which non-dominant parties communicate and create community (Scott 1990).

17 See also Ahmed (2012), Gutierrez y Muhs et al. (2012), and Gibbons and Fruchtman (2020) in this issue. For the issue of "the politics of citation" in religious studies, see Parrish (2009).

18 Thanks to Sara Ronis for these Twitter suggestions.

19 These include, but are not limited to, historical accidents (like the manuscript survivals described in note 15 above), cultural devaluations of non-elite epistemologies (for example, defining literacy as being able to read and write in a non-vernacular language), and concerted programs of erasure (including the marginalization of "heterodox" views after Church councils). And then there are issues of reception, in which our contemporary prejudices prevent us from understanding the meaning of the text (see, for example, Thorley [1996] for a succinct presentation of the habitual modern misgendering of the female apostle Junia).

have to be absolute: encouraging students to suggest complementary content (or simply sharing with the class resources that, as often happens, individual students have brought up in class) can enhance students' sense of ownership of the class. Showcasing a diversity of voices both in premodern contexts and in scholarship can not only help students of varying backgrounds see themselves validated as active producers and curators of knowledge, but can also serve the intellectual interests of our field far better than pretending that, for instance, only the proto-orthodox had perspectives worth learning about or that only tweed-wearing old white men have the wherewithal to analyze late ancient material. Choosing topics that speak to contemporary hot-button issues can also help us be inclusive to politically marginalized students as we articulate the histories, ideological foundations, and, importantly, the noninevitability of contemporary injustices. For example, 2015 was an opportune year to teach the topics of marriage, gender, and sexuality in early Christianity, as the U.S. Supreme court heard arguments in Obergefell v. Hodges and subsequently made their historic decision to protect marriage equality as a civil right; similarly, a course on the use of the Bible in public discourse is a timely offering in election years. Such content choices can also help us navigate the tricky terrain of creating safe spaces for free expression. By scheduling politically relevant topics into our syllabi, we can offer our students opportunities to express their perspectives on difficult issues without blindsiding anyone—the listing of the day's topic can serve as a form of content warning, while we can all (students and teachers alike) come to class better prepared for a contentious or emotional dialogue.

B. "Just-in-Time Teaching" and the Flipped Classroom

Moving beyond content choices, there are ways of structuring courses to maximize effective student engagement with that content. Two related course design components stand out for their ability to satisfy all our classroom climate considerations: "Just-in-Time Teaching" (JiTT) and the flipped classroom.

JiTT involves requiring students to complete assessable assignments ("warm-ups") a few hours prior to arriving in class. The instructor then reviews these warm-ups to learn what their students are interested in, what misunderstandings need to be corrected, and what topics need to be drawn out. In practice, the instructor would have the class plan outlined (and, if applicable, have slides prepared), and would tweak their plan and activities based on student responses in the hours before class. Hence the name.[20]

The essence of JiTT is the idea that we can be more effective teachers if we know before the class period begins how our students have understood the materials for that day and what reflections or associations the materials may have prompted. We can then train our focus on areas of weakness and speak directly to our students' concerns, bringing in their voices and ideas. In JiTT, warm-ups can be as directive as focused (but evocative) reading questions or as free-form as emailing the instructor a question about the reading, so long as they achieve the aim of fostering student engagement.[21] But as Novak and Patterson note, the best warm-ups are those that prompt students to "come to class with informed responses that they are eager to defend" (2010, 7). Examples of these types of motivating exercises in a classroom focused on late ancient religion might include asking our students to take a side in a Council debate, for instance by asking them to argue against Nicea from Arius's position; asking students to imagine themselves as historical figures in hypothetical situations, for example by asking them what Anthony might have thought of Athanasius's biography of him; asking students to reflect on their own perspectives by "othering" them through ancient eyes, for instance asking them what Augustine might have thought of American exceptionalism (or perhaps a popular TV show). The warm-ups should invite creativity and ask students to synthesize information, linking what they are learning to what they think they already know and to things they encounter every day but had never previously thought to examine.

To best address our classroom climate considerations we recommend warm-ups that are fairly open-ended, and that allow students to see and possibly to react to one another's responses, thus helping to create rapport among peers. For example, students could submit brief forum posts (guided by prompts or not) prior to class time via a web-based learning management system.[22] It gives all

20 JiTT was developed in the mid-1990s by Gregor Novak, Evelyn Patterson, and Andrew Gavrin, working at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and at the U.S. Air Force Academy, with support from the National Science Foundation (see Novak and Patterson 2010, 5).

21 As practitioners note, it is extremely important to adapt JiTT to your own teaching style (Novak 2011, 68). Furthermore, as a practical consideration for instructors with heavy teaching loads and limited time for grading, it is worth noting that since the point of these preliminary exercises is to shape the class plan, they can be graded quickly via a "check plus, check, no check" system without comments (because you will largely be addressing their concerns in class); because they represent a substantial amount of work and consideration on the students' part, they can be weighted heavily as part of the student's course grade (though it should be noted that even a weighting of 5-10 percent is enough to produce 80-90 percent participation [Novak and Patterson 2010, 16]).

22 These could be structured in various ways to suit the size of the class, the level of the class, and the instructor's time constraints. For example, for a fifteen-student, upper-level course that met three times a week, each student would be responsible for originating a thread in the forums the night before class, while all students would respond to their choice of thread prior to every class period, with enough "drops" built in to the grading to allow students to respond one or two times per week. By contrast, a forty-person, lower-level course would require students to originate threads only three times in the semester, with just-in-time forum responses required for approximately half of the class meetings. With clear grading criteria (such as focusing on quote utilization and clarity), and generously weighted, option-limited rubrics, grading these does not have to be onerous. To aid in my own time management, I (Fruchtman) do not give comments on response posts, only the originating posts. This, however, is a time-saving feature of JiTT, as noted above: rather than responding individually to students via comments on individual assignments, you incorporate their responses into your class presentation, obviating the need for several types of individual interventions.

students the opportunity to express themselves and shape the direction of the class while still allowing the instructor to steer focus, making it more inductive than traditional methods. And it also offers the instructor the buffer of a learning management system (LMS) through which to moderate and address problematic or offensive comments individually, thus helping to make the class feel safer for free expression. It also equalizes the voices in class, giving everyone the space to contribute and allowing students to weigh in relatively anonymously, thus contributing to inclusivity.[23] This is helpful especially for one particular group of marginalized students: introverts (Zimmerman 2018).[24] In practice, JiTT produces better attendance, better study habits, and better preparation for class, as well as strikingly more significant cognitive gains than traditionally taught classes (Novak 2011, 71, 70).

In conjunction with JiTT, the use of a flipped classroom offers even more opportunity for implementing inclusive and inductive pedagogy in an atmosphere of safe expression. At the heart of the flipped classroom is the notion that classroom time should be reserved for activities and discussions that presume familiarity with the material and that could not be accomplished by the student sitting alone in a room reading or watching videos. While some versions of the flipped classroom involve recorded lectures and activity-only class periods,[25] the aspect of the flipped classroom we want to recommend here is simply the idea that class time should not be used to replicate the material encountered in the students' assigned readings, but to engage students on the material, both with the instructor and with one another. JiTT is one excellent and evidence-supported way of ensuring that students do enough work at home to participate fully in class, but other strategies might work as well, provided that, as with JiTT, there is some mechanism for all students to express themselves and attempt to deal with the material in an inductive fashion. The flipped classroom allows more class time for instructors to attend to their students' perspectives (which facilitates both inclusion and a sense of safety for expression) and to allow for inductive explorations of the material.

C. Anti-racist Grading Practices

There is not space here for a full discussion of anti-racist grading practices, but suffice it to say that students are frequently assessed on skills which they bring to (rather than develop in) the class, skills which are "more representative of socioeconomic status [and experience with academic English] than knowledge" (Polish 2017, citing her mentor Carmen Kynard). Anonymized grading, contract grading, labor-based grading, and other alternatives—allowing, for instance (for those who have the time and instructional support), unlimited revisions on submitted work—are some options for structuring our courses in inclusive ways that allow our students full, free expression and make the most of student autonomy without sacrificing rigor.[26] These techniques help safeguard against unwitting instructor bias in grading and remove artificial, unjust, and inequitable barriers to students demonstrating that they have mastered core concepts.

2. Instructor Behavior

Structural strategies lay an excellent foundation for politically responsible pedagogy, but it is also crucial that we cultivate best practices in our own behavior as instructors. Certainly even the best-organized, most equitably structured class can be derailed by a careless instructor, and even the most uninspired course design can be mitigated by an instructor who models respectful dialogue and politically astute critical inquiry.

First and foremost, instructors must be informed on areas of social justice and aware of how privilege operates: even if politics never comes up explicitly or overtly, we need to be prepared in case it does, and we need to be able to sense when there are political undercurrents to what our students are saying (Gay 2002). We also need to be cognizant of our students' positionalities, as much as we are able. What trends are there among the students our institutions serve? Are they residential students or commuter students? First generation or legacy? Full-time or part-time? How many of them have jobs and/or kids? Where are they from, regionally, culturally,

One final note: It is always good to give your students the option of emailing you their posts/responses privately, to assuage their anxieties about sharing their views in public. Students seem to rarely choose this option, and, if they do, they only exercise it once or twice, on particularly fraught issues or when they feel uncertain about their reading of a text. But it is an important option to have on the table.

23 It can allow completely anonymous responses if the instructor chooses, since many learning management systems include features that hide identifiers.

24 We should also note that there are many factors that contribute to student silence in the classroom (see Panofsky and Bogad 2011); JiTT is helpful in almost all cases.

25 There has been a surge of online opportunities in the study of religion and late antiquity in recent years, which offer useful resources for a flipped classroom approach: for example, Society of Biblical Literature's Bible Odyssey project; edX courses such as Laura Nasrallah's (2020) "Early Christianity: The Letters of Paul," Gary Anderson and John Cavadini's (2020) "Jesus in Scripture and Tradition," and "Religious Literacy: Traditions and Scriptures" series organized by Diane Moore (2020); and Barry Scott Wimpfheimer's (2020) Coursera course "The Talmud: A Methodological Introduction."

26 As an example of labor-based grading, see Traci Gardner's infographic (http://tracigardner.com/labor/); for anti-racist assessment ecologies, see Inoue (2015). For overall strategies of fostering student success despite differences in student background and preparation without sacrificing rigor, see Gabriel (2018).

linguistically, and economically speaking? What are their interests and media consumption habits? What are their preferred names, nicknames, and pronouns?[27] This awareness is crucial not only to skillfully pitching our explanations and examples,[28] but to the interpersonal relationships that we build with students (which have been shown to improve student outcomes; students' sense of belonging affects both class performance and persistence to degree [Booker and Campbell-Whatley 2018, 14-15; Booker 2016; Strayhorn 2010]).[29] Including a survey on the first day of class or a mandatory early-in-the-semester office hour visit for credit can help instructors begin to get to know their students' backgrounds, personalities, intellectual landscapes, and para-academic concerns.

While building rapport and establishing interpersonally-based pedagogies may be a best practice in an ideal setting, it is important to acknowledge that these might be unattainable by some instructors or even undesirable for them, for the same reasons that we must attend to the positionality of our students: in other words, instructor positionality matters, too (see Gibbons and Fruchtman [2020]). There are myriad reasons an instructor might not feel like they themselves belong at an institution: contingent status, social marginalization or vulnerability, affiliation (or even perceived affiliation) with an underrepresented group, and so forth might all make establishing rapport difficult and even potentially dangerous for some instructors. Further, instructors in these positions are typically already overburdened: contingent faculty are often piecing together a living by teaching many courses at several different schools, and women and minoritized faculty are disproportionately sought-after by students seeking guidance or mentorship (as well as by administrators looking to diversify their committees). These potential pitfalls to interpersonally-based pedagogies are why structural strategies are so crucial.

A far more basic and broadly accessible strategy is to cultivate "confirming communication"—that is, enacting endorsement, recognition, and acknowledgement in interpersonal interaction (Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield 2010, 169). This does not mean that we cannot press our students or challenge their views; rather the goal is to recognize the humanity of our students such that we can show "acceptance and validation of [their] feelings and thoughts, . . . awareness of [their] existence, and . . . attentiveness to what [a student] says, feels, or thinks" (Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield 2010, 169). Specific techniques for cultivating this communication include expressing interest in student comments verbally or through nonverbal cues like making eye contact or nodding, avoiding "disconfirming behaviors" like verbal aggression or dismissiveness (2010, 170), and practicing Active Empathic Listening (AEL), in which the instructor fully acknowledges student comments while incorporating them into class, following a tripartite structure of sensing, processing/evaluating, and responding (Weger [2018]; see also the very helpful account of Nonviolent Communication in Agnew [2012, 215-217]). In essence, instructors should show by whatever means we are comfortable that we are taking our students seriously.[30]

The biggest thing we can do as instructors to meet the challenges of all of our classroom climate considerations is to make our students feel heard and listened to, so that they feel like valued members of a learning community. By regulating our behavior as instructors to be welcoming, affirming, and supportively challenging, we can move closer to politically responsible classroom climates.

3. Students as Co-Constructors of the Classroom

Finally, a pedagogically fruitful classroom climate depends on the students themselves—learning environments are co-constructed by students and instructors, and student-to-student connectedness has a larger impact on student communication and participation than either class size or instructor encouragement (Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield 2010; Booker 2016). While we can do much, structurally speaking, to ensure that students engage with one another—designing the course to include student-to-student interaction through forums, group work, peer feedback, and time allocated for collaborative classroom exercises, for example—student-to-student interaction and sharing do not by themselves guarantee positive encounters.

Instructor behavior can help effect appropriately respectful critical classroom discourse, as students tend to model their interactions with one another on instructors' interactions with them (Ellis 2004; Johnson 2009; Weger 2018). But instructors can also be more overt

27 For practical guides for this topic in critical pedagogy, see Spade (2011).

28 It was with great sorrow, for example, that I (Fruchtman) discovered in 2018 that the climax of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is no longer a usable demonstration of the concept of "the numinous."

29 See Frisby et al. (2014), Bourhis and Allen (1992), and Goodboy and Myers (2008) for the correlation of rapport/confirmation and student performance. As Booker and Campbell-Whatley note: "When students feel disrespected, unwelcomed, or fearful, learning is minimized. Conversely, when classroom dynamics are positive, inclusive, and engaging, learning can flourish optimally" (2018, 15).

30 Modeling this sort of respect for our students also has the added benefit of encouraging them to show respect for one another (Weger 2018).

in recruiting our students to help us cultivate an atmosphere of safe exploration and open inquiry. For example, we can choose to be transparent with our students, discussing with them the balances we hope to achieve in the classroom and asking for their help in establishing guidelines to realize them—an example of inductive pedagogy we can exercise on the first day of class.

Instructors can also suggest and implement explicit guidelines of our own that we explain to our students and ask them to honor, "introducing dialogue as an intentional mode of discourse for the class" (DeTemple and Sarrouf 2017, 289). Aaron Castelán Cargile suggests "adding without contradiction" as "a conversational frame that allows dialogue participants to express a multiplicity of cultural truths" (2010, 137).[31] As the name indicates, adding without contradiction asks students to contribute their own perspectives and their own stories without negating other students' expressions of their own experiences. It encourages students to see their in-class comments as adding threads to the fabric of knowledge woven by the class, rather than as replacing or competing against other comments.

Another option, detailed by Jill DeTemple and John Sarrouf in a profoundly helpful 2017 article in the Wabash Center's *Teaching Theology and Religion* (with implementation discussed further in a 2019 interview in the same journal), is Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD). In RSD, the goal is to disrupt our habitual modes of listening and argumentation, incorporating time for reflection and space for everyone to share, as well as inviting feedback on the process itself. We begin with deep questions—those that require complex, value-reflective answers rather than simple, actionable fixes. After taking a set time to reflect on the questions, students respond through structured speaking, following a pre-determined speaking order and confining their comments to a designated duration (usually a minute). Everyone reflects, everyone speaks, everyone listens, and the "artificial" format disrupts patterns of debate that keep us talking past one another. As the authors note, this is not a format that can be employed every class period (for most classes), but one that can be tremendously useful at specific moments in a course, and whose effects and repercussions for classroom interactions can be felt even when RSD is not actively being employed (DeTemple and Sarrouf 2017, 290).

"Adding without contradiction" and RSD both serve to help us move toward our classroom climate goals, once again by inviting diverse perspectives and making sure our students feel heard—not just by their instructors but by their peers.

We have gathered these suggested best practices—for structuring our classes, adapting our instructional personae, and encouraging our students to take shared ownership of the classroom—not with any intention of being exhaustive or restrictive, but to showcase some possible and practicable ways that we can improve our pedagogy for a greater number of our students.

Conclusion

The suggested best practices presented here are evidence-based, practice-tested strategies for optimizing student learning, and may already be familiar to *The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching's* readers as techniques for encouraging active learning. But they are also strategies with great potential for making students of all political identities and positionalities feel included in the classroom, for encouraging all students to express and challenge themselves, and for training students to responsibly assume control of their intellectual pursuits and apply the skills and content they have learned in new contexts. They are strategies, in short, that will allow as many of our students as possible to understand as well as possible the insights and lessons afforded by the discipline of religious studies.

It is no coincidence that effective teaching means inclusive teaching, or that awareness of the pervasiveness of the political enhances our pedagogy. To be effective *paedagogoi*, leading our students to their studies, we need first to be able to locate them—to see them and recognize them for who they are. We need to know which paths are treacherous for them and how such narrow ways might be navigated. We need to consider what lessons and what sources will best capture their attention and encourage them to assimilate what they learn in our classrooms into their own critical worldviews. Finding our students, guiding them, and ensuring that they learn the essential lessons of our field—this would all be impossible without acknowledging the political pressures they (and we) are subject to, the forces that help shape all of us and our experiences in the classroom.

31 While the practice of "adding without contradiction" seems to be an effective pedagogical tool, the authors would like to note that Cargile's (2010) characterization of it as an "Eastern outlook" is problematic.

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