

**Cultivating a Pedagogy of Possibility:
A Womanist Christian Social Ethicist's Teaching Philosophy**

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My approach to pedagogy is inspired by familial lessons of my youth. In particular, I highlight my mother's and grandmother's narratives, which were colorful and instructive doses of wisdom and struggle, were to me the quintessence of what it means to be self-reflexive. Meanwhile, my father's insistence that I be confident and vulnerable enough to reason with him about opinions or concerns of mine that differed from his lovingly nurture and abiding desire in me to engage people intellectually. In relaying the trying and promising details about their past and my family's history, they taught me that if I strive to cultivate the virtue of noble character and see each encounter whether positive or negative as a teaching-learning moment, I can live a most meaningful and purposeful life. At a rudimentary level, this maxim has shaped my approach to the teaching profession and particularly my teaching philosophy.

My pedagogical philosophy can be gleaned from eight tenets: (1) the personal is indeed political; (2) learning and teaching raises the most essential questions about human existence; (3) teachers must generate strategies that demand both critical reflection and accountability whether it be personal, social, or institutional; (4) the learning process is one in which the theoretical lends itself to the practical; (5) the teaching moment must grapple with issues such as freedom of choice, conscious action, personal character, and considerations of moral responsibility; (6) the link between the theory and practice of human relationship become much clearer when the teaching moment is one which strives to understand why people do what they do in order to figure out what ought to be done; (7) what one believes about teaching lies as at the core of what I do and who I am; and most importantly, (8) the teacher's main goal should be to meet students where they are while revealing to them a better, possible future.

I strive to create a teaching-learning context that is at once academically rigorous, socially relevant, and character-building. I approach the teaching vocation with the goal of exposing students to worlds of ideas and beliefs, discursive realms they can enter and engage, in order to cultivate sound character and to enlarge their capacity for sound scholarship, ministerial leadership, and good citizenship. One of my primary goals is to elicit from students an intellectual investment in assigned readings and pedagogical process throughout the term of each course. In so doing, I specifically introduce them to definitive inquiries, methods, and conceptual frameworks, equipping them not only with information but also with disciplinary competency.

I encourage students to view the field of theological education in immediate relationship to religion and in cognate relationship with other disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences. I demonstrate this view through our comprehensive range of course offerings – from biblical/textual and church/religious history courses to social ethics and postcolonial studies. I cannot guarantee that they all ascribe to this liberal arts philosophy of education. Nevertheless, I work hard to establish an environment where students develop the intellectual courage and imagination to identify places of coherence and cross-fertilization across their core curriculum.

Living in an era of increased multiculturalism and rapid global transformation, I believe that we as teachers who engage in the fight for social justice must ask ourselves the existential ethical question, "How does my teaching bring about social justice for the very people who see justice as impossible in their lives?" My social justice trajectory in this teaching-learning process is to invite my students into a living laboratory context where we collectively seek to transform the world in which we live. We do this by interpreting the various ways that people believe, feel, know and understand the sacred in their lives. As my students wrestle with these ways of knowing and the worldviews that espouse them, they initially find my classroom a highly overwhelming and contested space.

Unapologetically, my pedagogy, then, creates conflict in the minds, lives and souls of the students who enroll in my interdisciplinary courses in Ethics, Black Church Studies, and Feminist/Womanist Studies. Not only these challenging and integrated approaches, but also my very embodiment as a thirty-something Black woman, create cognitive dissonance and cultural shock for most of my students. Rather than shying away from this reality, I find the creation of conflict to be a vital component for the resolution of conflict, and ultimately, the attainment of social justice. To create conflict is to bring about change. And only through change can unjust conditions be transformed to positive life options. I use this conflict and dissonance in my teaching by chipping away at the external façade of many of my students' identities as well as their expectations of the teaching learning process.

By way of illustration, on the first day of my "Introduction to Christian Social Ethics," I always begin with the statement, "Ethics begins where problems start." By using case studies, "ripped from the headlines" I seek to put my students *in media res*, by immersing them in the heart of a given subject, rather than allowing them the safe distance that supposed objectivity and abstraction usually affords them. Such "objectivity" causes them to invest in the lowest forms of moral thinking wherein descriptive ethics is used in an effort to construct a normative theory of human nature that, for instance, judges people based on the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Instead, my disciplinary objective is to have them exercise the highest form of moral reasoning wherein metaethics bears witness to answering questions with logic and epistemological insight so we might be less occupied with right and wrong and more preoccupied with the just and good for all. At the same time, I affirm what they bring to the classroom. My courses attract the full-range of our student body. Many of these students are second career professionals whose employment experiences range from working in the fields of banking, medicine, social work, education, childcare, government, to engineering. By exploring Christian social ethics and contestable ethical issues that deal with Christian moral responses to social cases such as abortion, euthanasia, economic development, globalization, and affirmative action, I help students bring their own expertise to our living laboratory. Each and every semester, I am amazed and pleased when students make connections between their former academic and career training and the logic that undergirds Christian social ethics, its language, concepts, theories, and motifs.

As a result, I entice my students into the world of thinking, being, and doing while cultivating within them a sense of purpose, personal reflection, and a desire to be actively involved in the teaching-learning moment. In a context where many students tend to feel anonymous and virtually discounted, emphasizing that each person in the classroom – teacher and student alike – can and will achieve their highest aspirations is the most prized aspect of the learning process to me. Based on the level of personal investment everyone brings to the class, we can collectively realize that learning and teaching, as symbiotic enterprises, are neither isolated nor disposable. Instead, the moments

spent discussing assigned readings, deciphering abstract theories, and debating thorny issues enable them to demystify their personal experiences and share their newfound understanding with others. In that sense, students may begin to see their education as an all-encompassing element of their lives, one that goes far beyond and lasts long after the classroom experience. In every class session, I strive to cultivate a “pedagogy of possibility” wherein my expressed hope is that my students will venture out into the “real world” as dynamic, thoughtful people ready, willing, and able to face the challenges of life with the same certainty and passion that I bring to the classroom everyday – knowing and believing that inherent within each of us is the change in the world that we so desperately seek.