

Teaching and Learning Statement

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Context in Which You Teach about Religion and How You Practice Effective Pedagogy Therein

The (class)room is appropriately named, for it is indeed a room of class - a room where students learn the class they belong to and the power and privilege (or lack thereof) associated with said class.¹ The fact that some students are able to afford exorbitant tuitions to attend particular rooms of class located on prestigious ivy league campuses indicates they will have certain opportunities denied to those of lower economic class, those who are more often than not students of color whose communities reside on the margins of society. Far from being an objective neutral educational system, students who attend (class)rooms can either be conditioned for domestication by, or liberation from existing social structures. All too often, the educational system serves to normalize and legitimize these power structures. My task as an educator, specifically as one who calls himself a liberationist, is to cultivate the student's ability to find their own voice by creating an environment in which individual and collective consciousness-raising occurs.

As a scholar-activist, unapologetically grounded in a Latinx social context, I create an environment within this "room of class" which attempts to perceive Divinity from the social location of disenfranchised communities - those usually unable to participate in the (class)room where I teach. Such a process analyzes their reality. But academically understanding their reality, as if they are an object to be examined, is problematic, if not paternalistic, if said reality is not linked to perspectives demanding socio-political responses to oppression. A relationship develops between the subjugated and intellectual aware of the structural crises people of color

¹ I am indebted to one of my mentors, John Raines, who would constantly remind me of this fact during my doctoral studies.

face in the United States. This employed pedagogy within my constructed room of class seeks to uncover social ethics through the rich diversity found among those usually excluded due to race and ethnicity. Succinctly stated, what occurs in the context of my (class)room is the construction of a collaborative survival ethics. The study of its impact is based upon the reflection of marginalized people who struggle in understanding their faith and vocation as it is contextualized in their lives and circumstances.

Pedagogical Arc and Purpose of Your Syllabi.

I am a scholar-activist, not an activist-scholar. In other words, the emphasis is on my scholarship informed by my activism. The recently designed course to be taught this Fall, “Ethics in an Age of Plagues, Pestilence, and Pandemics,” is a case in point. During a time of global crises, not only is it important to understand the ethical during calamities, but also, what type of liberative praxis can be employed to move society toward a more justice-based response. To that end, the course invites the student to participate in a dialogue I hold with religious thought leaders throughout the world to force the student to move beyond the normative U.S.-centric understanding and response to COVID-19. At the intersection of teaching, ethical reflection, and the newspaper, I have designed another course to be taught next year titled “Ethics in an Era of Protest, Riots and Race War.” Using a similar methodology, the student will be invited to participate with me in conversations with religious leaders, activists, and academicians to better grasp the 2020 protests responding to the police brutality often experienced by marginalized communities.

Effective teaching entails a reply to injustice and oppression. By forcing my students to occupy the uncomfortable space of the marginalized from which to approach religious studies,

they are provided with a unique outlook on the normative discourse, a view I believe enhances traditional Eurocentric curricula. Because individuals enter the educational system with a lifetime of experiences and knowledge, I design my courses to bring their suppositions into conversation with those who many may consider have nothing to offer the intellectual dialogue.

Pedagogical Situation Where You Know Your Students Are Learning

My students and I were sitting on a dirt-floor hut in a squatter village on the outskirts of Cuernavaca, Mexico. Joining me were mostly white, economically privileged students who sought to learn about God from the wretched of the land. Our “teacher” was an illiterate *mestiza* who patiently answered our questions (with me serving as translator). We asked who is God; who is Jesus Christ; who is the Virgin Mary? Her answers, theologically speaking, were frightful. They were a mixture of superstition and popular Catholicism. It soon became clear she lacked orthodoxy – correct doctrine. Then her barefooted son (about eleven-years-old) entered the one-room hut with a few pesos earned selling Chiclets to tourists. As she collected the money, she placed one peso aside. I asked her what that was for. She replied that it was for the poor. At that moment, the orthopraxis of this poor indigenous woman taught my students (and me) more about Divinity than all of the academic books we have read. Witnessing the “widow’s mite” was more effective than any lecture I could have possibly given.

Only by being an organic intellectual within my (class)room located among squatter villages can my students and I contribute toward the struggle against institutionalized violence. For this reason, my role as a scholar-activist must include solidarity with the least among us. The praxis of dealing with oppressive structures within dispossessed communities is more crucial than books published by the “experts.” What this illiterate indigenous woman from Cuernavaca

taught me is not to teach or publish just to express my views in the marketplace of scholarly opinions; rather, teach and write to give voice to the voiceless, to put into words what the marginalized are feeling and doing. No doubt, such a methodology will usually anger those accustomed to viewing their power and privilege as birthrights; still, teaching from the margins of society must be done if I, as a teacher, hope to raise my students' consciousness, hopelessly hoping to transform a small corner of the world.