

“Composing Contexts for Insight: a Personal Teaching Statement”

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During my sophomore year in college, in the midst of answering a single, comprehensive exam question for a required religion course, I became aware of myself thinking and thinking well, aware of the self-transcending delight of that act, aware of the powerful and dangerous freedom and possibility it bestowed. I walked out of that final knowing that I could never un-know what I now knew. Nor did I want to. That event was a defining moment of insight into the power of literacy and critical thought, and into the dangerous wager that is liberal education. It remains the autobiographical touchstone for the question that guides my practice of teaching: How do I compose a context for intellectual insight?

This question has no single answer. It invites careful attention to the many dimensions of the dynamic process that is teaching and learning. When I am designing a class session, conversing with a student, directing a Wabash Center workshop, or discussing pedagogical challenges with colleagues, the question orients my awareness, thinking, and response.

My question frames teaching, primarily, as an act of composition. My goal is to compose an environment in which students become able to read closely, think critically, and imagine the worlds of others accurately and with empathy. I aim for an environment in which they learn to practice the procedures of religious studies/church history with disciplined subjectivity and make more adequate, nuanced meaning of course material and the world. I strive for an environment that embodies that artful balance of challenge and support that helps students learn—the context for insight.¹

As in any composition, alignment is crucial.² The project of aligning students to the course material, to religious studies, and to thinking begins with clarifying what I want them to have learned by the end of a course. For example, in American Church History, I want students to come away understanding and able to identify and describe the mutual influence among dimensions of religious systems and the larger social context in the experience of a range of religious and ethnic groups across time in North America. I introduce the course with stark examples of religious change in American religious history and raise the question of how change occurs. I choose readings and develop activities around the central goal. Toward the middle of the first unit on colonial religion I include a conceptual workshop “accounting for religious change.”³ At this point we have discussed three primary documents--John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity,” Rev. Jonas Michaelius’ letter from New Amsterdam to a clerical colleague in Old Amsterdam, and a petition from a group of Lutherans in New Amsterdam requesting permission to practice their religion. In the conceptual workshop teams of students craft a claim about the impact of the North American context on European religious groups that holds for all three cases and acknowledges the similarities and differences among them. The task challenges students to comprehend unfamiliar material, to think as historians, and to develop a multi-faceted claim about religious change.

The conceptual workshop is one of a carefully sequenced set of activities that build, one upon the other, increasing in difficulty and degree of independent thought required. For each activity I also provide a rationale and criteria. Telling students why we are doing an assignment, and what it looks like well done, is part of the way I frame the learning experience for students, simultaneously challenging them to think and to

think about their thinking. In steps not unlike a ritual, then, the course invites students into the kinds of questions, analyses, and disciplined constructive thinking that are the stuff of church history. By the end, many become aware that they are practicing the procedures of a discipline and joining an on-going conversation aimed at trying to understand religion in North America. (To make the last real, I arrange phone seminars with authors of texts whenever possible.)

When students do come to insight it is because of their courage. Students are in the class to learn about religion, an emotionally and socially loaded subject. Learning is hard work. It costs on multiple levels. Learning often entails distress, especially when students encounter information and concepts that call into question long accepted ideas and actions. Many grieve for lost certainties, are sobered by loss of naiveté, and suffer strained relationships. Keeping integrity with my students demands that I never forget that learning worth the name is a profoundly human drama, of dignity, courage, risk, fear, loss, accomplishment, and sometimes, surprising gift.⁴

Teaching also is ascetical practice. It involves taking on of the discipline of being the fitting companion for students on their intellectual journeys, not demanding that they be the companions I want on my intellectual journey.⁵ Designing courses as environments for intellectual insight is part of ascetical practice. So too is remaining detached from my dreams for my students. I want them to approach religion with a more complex set of conceptual frames and to think more critically and compose meaning more richly when they leave my courses. Yet, to make this possible, I must respect their freedom neither to learn nor to think. While I have power over them through shaping the course, evaluating their work, and being “the professor,” they cannot become thinkers on

their own unless I am willing in all that I say and do and refrain from saying and doing, to create a space of bounded, gracious play, within which they might try out thinking differently. Sometimes I grieve what to me appears a refusal to try out the fuller life that can come through critical thought. Ascetical practice continues in my on-going discipline of being a learner. I regularly take classes in things at which I do not excel. This helps me imagine better the learning experience of students.

Finally, teaching is a wager on the world. I challenge students to learn about American religious history. In doing so, I invite them to cross the bridge from who they are to whom they might become, to develop more complex consciousness through their encounter with the content and procedures of religious studies. The invitation is fraught with promise and peril. The promise includes the possibility of developing a richer, more nuanced relationship to whomever and whatever is, including oneself; finding the freedom to choose commitments out of inner integrity instead of imposed obligation; and, realizing the capacity for self-transcending delight in the other that makes genuine creativity and community possible. The peril includes the loss of the comfort of a host of absolute certitudes; taking up the burden of self-responsibility; the realization that one's knowing can be skewed and distorted; and, the understanding that one's actions and choices, motivated by the best of intentions, cause harm. Our world needs human beings who know both the promise and the peril and do not flee. And so I teach.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Stephen Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).
- ² I am indebted to Don Wolff at the University of Washington for pointing me toward alignment as a useful metaphor.
- ³ I am borrowing the term from Donald Finkel, *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, NY: Heinemann, 2000).
- ⁴ See Brookfield and my “Gracious Play: Discipline, Insight and the Common Good” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 4/1 (February 2001): 2-8.
- ⁵ See Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), chapter 10.