



Equity-Focused Pedagogies in the Religious Studies Classroom

Spotlight on Teaching

Spotlight on Teaching is a major teaching and learning initiative of the AAR and its Committee on Teaching and Learning. Over the last several years, it has become a principal venue for exploring opportunities and challenges in teaching and learning about religions. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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Contributors

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Sarah Bogue is the director of digital learning and an assistant professor in the practice of church history at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Her academic training is in early medieval history, but she has spent the majority of her career in dual staff-faculty roles, first in theological libraries and now in digital learning and faculty development. She teaches classes on medieval history and research practices and played a fundamental role as the school transitioned to online learning in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yanitsa Buendia de Llaca is an ethnographer and historian of Mexican and Latinx religions and spiritualities. Her work explores Indigenous revitalizations and Indigenous identity recognition in a transnational context. In her most current ethnographic research, she focuses on ritual practices, performance (e.g., Aztec Dance), and embodied knowledges (e.g., Aztec calendar interpretations) of Toltec and Aztec revitalization movements. Within these topics, she puts into question the categories of race, religion, ethnic and national identities, and the borderlands. As a bilingual researcher and instructor, she is always interested in language intersections and acquisition. Currently, she teaches ethnic studies courses at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

Ann Burlein is professor of religion at Hofstra University, where she teaches courses in the religion department that focus on religion and the body, as well as in disability studies and the School for Health Professions. She currently directs Hofstra's program in women's studies. She is the author of *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Religious Right Converge* (Duke University Press, 2002) and editor of the enchantment issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, numbers 3–4 (2012). She is currently writing a book titled *Truly, Madly Deeply* that explores the connections between literature and medicine in the early thought of Michel Foucault by investigating the role of Catholicism in the three thinkers (Klossowski, Blanchot, and Bataille) whom Foucault credited with helping him escape his disciplinary training.

Since obtaining his doctorate in 1999, **Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre** has authored over a hundred articles and published forty-one books (five of which won national awards). He is professor of social ethics and Latinx studies at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. A Fulbright scholar, he has taught in Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, and Germany. Within his guild, the American Academy of Religion, he is the recipient of the 2020 Excellence in Teaching Award and the 2021 Martin Marty Public Understanding of Religion Award. A scholar-activist, Dr. De La Torre wrote the screenplay to a [documentary](#) on immigration.

Ada Jaarsma is professor of philosophy at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada. Her recent coedited book collection is *Dissonant Methods: Undoing Discipline in the Humanities Classroom* (University of Alberta Press, 2020). She teaches Existentialism, Philosophy of Sex and Love, Philosophy of Science, and Feminist Philosophy. Her work examines the embodied and

affective dynamics of meaning-making, from placebo effects to pedagogy. You can read more of her work [here](#).

Julie Mavity Maddalena is assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Lakeland University in Plymouth, Wisconsin. She is also director of the Ulrich Center for Faith, Ethics, and Justice, which facilitates Lakeland's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives. She has been passionate about liberative pedagogies since she was introduced to Paulo Freire and bell hooks many years ago. She has a certificate in advanced pedagogy in religious and theological studies and has been a social justice scholar, educator, activist, and advocate since 2010.

Kevin Minister is an associate professor of religion at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, about ninety minutes outside Washington, DC. Kevin also serves as the assistant director of Shenandoah Conversations for Dialogic Engagement, training instructors on how to use dialogue in teaching and how to create a culture of dialogue in the classroom, supporting instructors in their ongoing efforts to implement dialogic pedagogy, and training students in skills for facilitating difficult conversations. The majority of Kevin's courses and scholarship are in the field of interreligious/transreligious studies. As a participating faculty in environmental studies at Shenandoah, Kevin also teaches and writes in the area of religion and ecology.

Kristyn Sessions is a Catherine of Siena Fellow in the Ethics Program at Villanova University. She previously taught at Agnes Scott College in the Religious Studies Department and earned her PhD at Emory University with her dissertation, "Small Is Beautiful: Ritual, Congregation-Based Community Organizing, and Just Social Change."

Ashlyn Strozier's scholarly interest is attentive to religion, race, and health with a clear focus on religion, gender, and sexuality. She recently defended her dissertation, "A Womanist Theo-ethic of Reproductive Freedom: An Ethnographic Study of Black Women's Faith and Reproductive Decisions," at Claremont Graduate University. In it, she examines Black feminism, ethnography, health policy, and African American religion as she explores Black women's reproductive health. Dr. Strozier is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies at Georgia State University.

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds is an associate professor of Africana studies and religious studies at Indiana University's School of Liberal Arts (IUPUI) and the associate director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture (CSRAAC). His research interests are Black religion and scriptures, alternative Christianities in the Black diaspora, and the role and impact of teaching in the lives of Black academics. Tucker Edmonds most recently contributed to a forthcoming volume on teaching titled *Teaching Critical Religious Studies*, and his book, *The Other Black Church: Alternative Christian Movements and the Struggle for Black Freedom*, was published in December 2020.

Yvonne C. Zimmerman is associate academic dean and associate professor of Christian ethics at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio near Columbus, Ohio. Her primary area of research is the movement to end human trafficking, and she has published extensively on this topic, including *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex, and Human Trafficking* (Oxford University Press, 2012). She holds a bachelor's of arts from Goshen College, a master's of theological studies (MTS) from Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and a PhD in religious and theological studies from Iliff School of Theology and the University of Denver.

Editor's Introduction

Molly Bassett, Georgia State University

The essays in this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* highlight faculty perspectives on equity-focused pedagogies from a variety of institutional and career perspectives. Our intention is to contribute to ongoing conversations about how faculty address issues of equity and create more equitable classrooms in ways that readers will find provocative, productive, and adaptable in their own contexts. The idea for collecting essays around equity-focused pedagogies came from my own encounter with [Asao Inoue's](#) scholarship in a Writing Across the Curriculum workshop at my home institution. You'll find Inoue's work alongside many other recommended readings linked in this issue.

Inside the issue, prepare to encounter frank assessments of the insidious and injurious role white supremacy plays in learning, especially in places where its hegemonic status reigns or, as Yvonne Zimmerman writes, its "hegemonic frameworks and mindsets [...] make alternatives unthinkable." Alongside our colleagues' descriptions of the deeply detrimental effects of inequitable education, you'll find imaginative, thoughtful, caring, and joyful approaches to equitable teaching that may inspire your own pedagogical renovations. From approaches inspired by Bettina L. Love's *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* to those that take inspiration from *Antigone* and *Pose*, the essays in this issue of *Spotlight* draw on philosophies of teaching and learning informed by queer thought, Black joy, Spanglish *chisme*, and pandemic perspectives.

At times, they also draw on the contributor's own experience of marginalization. AAR Teaching Award recipient Miguel De La Torre begins his essay with a reflection on BIPOC scholars' experiences: "Scholars of color frequently witness their scholarship dismissed as 'being more activist oriented than academic,' 'an interesting perspective for an elective class,' 'too subjective,' or 'lacking complexity.'" He insists—rightly—on the inclusion of diverse perspectives in all syllabi, an idea on which Joseph Tucker Edmonds elaborates in his essay: "I want to imagine religious studies classrooms or equity-informed pedagogical practices that place Black joy at the center rather than as a site reserved for students and teachers who have resources and spaces to create them."

Like Tucker Edmonds and De La Torre, many of the writers in this issue focus on the importance of bringing diverse voices to the forefront in learning, including the voices of their students. Kristyn Sessions explains that Love's writing inspired a moral exemplars assignment she developed. Sessions' assignment helps students see that they matter by encouraging them to select moral exemplars who matter to them. Developing projects through which students feel they—and others like them—matter, she notes, can counter narratives that devalue students. Using a different method, Kevin Minister focuses on student participation in an essay that describes his adoption of the reflective structured dialogue technique. "Because dialogue is grounded in structured reflection on the experiences of all participants in relation to the course content," Minister writes, "it differs from my class discussions that invite voluntary analysis of ideas in a free-flowing format that may not involve reflection on personal experience."

Other contributors have adopted approaches that invite students to see their own experiences, cultures, and languages as deep reservoirs for learning. Personal experience undergirds Julie Mavity Maddalena's adaptation of Tara J. Yosso's forms of capital in student work with asset maps. In assigning asset maps, Mavity Maddalena encourages students to consider how experiences that could be considered detrimental in some educational contexts can be assets. One example Mavity Maddalena shares is the idea that "communication skills gleaned from living in a bilingual household or community and code switching in a variety of contexts" can be a strength, rather than a deficit.

Yanitsa Buendia de Llaca's contribution explores the importance of validating Spanish-speaking students' multilingualism by mentoring through *chisme* and inviting students to write in Spanish, Spanglish, and/or vernacular English in class assignments. As she writes, "For many students who have been racialized and marginalized because of the use or trace of Spanish, having the opportunity to express themselves and be assessed in Spanish can be a powerful and healing experience." The diverse ways in which these instructors address equity center on their encounters with the students they teach and a concerted effort to help students see value in themselves.

Many faculty have revamped courses in the past few years as we have witnessed our students face heightened challenges related to access and equity. For example, Ann Burlein writes that she began "ungrading" as an equitable pedagogy before the pandemic and came to see it as critical during the pandemic: "Ungrading addresses [the] inequity [in rubrics] by asking each student to discern how they want to be intelligent in relation to course materials. Its virtue lies in how it encourages students to develop metacognition by reflecting on how they learn, what obstacles they face, how they respond to feedback, and where this class fits into their future."

As learning moved online during the pandemic, Ashlyn Strozier realized that focusing on the process, not the product, of learning would support equitable student engagement, and she shares signposts for building an equitable, process-focused, online classroom environment. Thinking about her students' access to resources during the pandemic led Sarah Bogue to redesign her writing assignments as projects of translation; students write a paper and then "translate" it for a public audience as art, sermon, dance, poetry, and so on. On reflection, Bogue notices that "an equitable pedagogical stance also honors the gifts and resources students bring to the classroom space."

Ada Jaarsma had long dreamed of teaching a course on *Antigone*, and her encounter with Ashton T. Crawley's [The Lonely Letters](#) completely shifted how she thought about the course from, as she says, "the what of the course to its how." Ultimately, she realized:

"Here's the crux: when we are in the throes of a semester, there is no "any student at all": rather, there is *this* student, and *that* student; students with a whole host of backgrounds, hang-ups, learning styles, and culturally formative perspectives. This is where generalizing about "all students" hits a wall, where even universal design faces a challenge—of reaching *this* student and *that* student, through their own affective and somatic perspectives. These perspectives themselves might well be shifting, especially in times of anxiety and alienation such as a pandemic."

The many, many challenges of teaching continue through the pandemic; through our witnessing of numerous murders of people of color; through political upheavals, insurgencies, and war; through students' and colleagues' mental/physical health crises; through our loss of loved ones; and on and on. As you read these essays, I think you'll find favorite passages and sentences with which you may struggle. Our dedication—and these colleagues' dedication—to equity in teaching offers a path forward through the challenges we face, and ideally our work to create more equitable environments for learning will do the same for our students.

Many thanks to these contributors and to Amanda Dominique, an educator and MA candidate in religious studies at Georgia State, who assisted in editing and assembling this issue.

Fostering Equity through Creativity

Sarah Bogue, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Flexibility Fatigue

I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. The crisis of Covid-19 forced higher education to attempt a new kind of flexibility, and we are beyond weary of pivoting. But, as the pandemic illuminated (yet again) the inequities built into our systems, faculty began to think expansively about what it means to meet students in the shared space of the classroom. This empathetic pedagogical stance invited faculty to think about access. When the classroom is a Starbucks parking lot or a shared bedroom with a caregiver or child, what does it mean to resource students for research and writing? What does it mean to consider individual student needs as an invitation to innovation rather than a begrudging accommodation?

In this way, the pandemic forced faculty to explore alternate delivery methods for their course content and to rethink the structure of their pedagogy. Faculty are seeing firsthand the potential in nontraditional modalities, especially when it comes to assessment. Increasing accessibility and cultivating equity in the classroom results in a more effective learning experience for everyone. Paradoxically, by avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and assessment, faculty have the opportunity to reach *all* of their students more effectively.

Stop Passing the Pedagogical Buck

The academic study of religion, like many humanities disciplines, traditionally relies on research papers as the primary means of assessing student learning. There has been much hand-wringing about student inability to produce such a product: "Students should have already learned how to ____ [write a research paper, write a thesis statement, cite journal articles] in ____ [high school, prerequisite class, etc.]. It's not *my* responsibility."

Although true equity might require us to abandon grading systems entirely (and I'd love to see more ungrading conversations), a first step toward more equitable assessment is simple: stop assuming. Stop assuming students have access to or awareness of research tools. Stop ascribing moral failure to students who lack your discipline's preferred "academic" skill set. Equity, first and foremost, requires faculty to provide all the training and tools necessary to complete assessments within the bounds of their own course. As many studies have shown, scaffolding the steps of a larger assignment within the course of a semester results in higher-quality work and more

confident students.¹ But equitable student access to resources requires so much more than a rote lesson on database search terms. By providing space *within* class sessions to learn from librarians, to start research, and to begin writing, faculty empower student learning by... making time for it.²

Perhaps more importantly, an equitable pedagogical stance also honors the gifts and resources students bring to the classroom space. The argumentative research paper has long privileged dominant white discourse at every level: from the style of the essay to the authors cited.³ These kinds of assessments often result in students blindly attempting to meet implicit professorial expectations and, what's worse, leave them feeling like they must sacrifice their own voices in service of achieving a grade.

To address these issues, and as a way of promoting equity and vocational discernment in my seminary classes, I have piloted a series of creative assignments I call "translation projects." I have assigned these creative "translations" in both a seminar-sized research methods course and a larger introduction to medieval history course. In both cases, I require students to begin with a short traditional research paper on a topic of their choosing. The research process is scaffolded throughout the semester with checkpoints for discussing their research question, their bibliographic search, and one or more drafts. Throughout this process, I talk frankly about how these kinds of assignments perpetuate the traditions of the academy and about the reasons I still choose to teach them to play the game. But those short research papers are merely the precursor to their final creative projects: reframing their chosen topic so that it can be heard and understood by a nonacademic audience.

The style of this "translation" is entirely up to the student, and I encourage students to create content for their current vocational situation. The range of student vocations varies as much as the translation modes chosen: I've received blog posts, sermons, church newsletters, pieces of art (dance, paintings, poetry), and social media content on every platform imaginable. Some students chose a medium they already knew well but had never been allowed to use in an academic context. Others chose a medium they wanted to dedicate the semester to learning. In almost every case, these translation projects achieved both of my learning goals: demonstrating historical awareness and the ability to create a compelling story about why contemporary audiences should care about that history. This assignment taps into what the folks in design thinking know so well: allowing students to experiment in the way they demonstrate their proficiency builds much-needed creative confidence.⁴

Assessing Creative Projects (If We Must)

¹ Lisa Bosman, "From Doing to Thinking: Developing the Entrepreneurial Mindset through Scaffold Assignments and Self-Regulated Learning Reflection," *Open Education Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 106–21, <https://doi.org/10.1515/edu-2019-0007>; David Hay, Ian Kinchin, and Simon Lygo-Baker, "Making Learning Visible: The Role of Concept Mapping in Higher Education," *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 3 (June 1, 2008): 295–311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802049251>; Jennifer C. Richardson et al., "Instructors' Conceptualization and Implementation of Scaffolding in Online Higher Education Courses," *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, November 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-021-09300-3>.

² Librarians are some of the most vital assets in supporting student access. In addition to the gifts they provide, there is real value in demonstrating that (1) faculty don't know everything and (2) we all benefit from the larger conversation within and outside the traditional academy.

³ Asao B. Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (Fort Collins, CO: Parlor, 2015).

⁴ Tom Kelley and David Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential within Us All*, illustrated ed. (New York: Currency, 2013).

Many faculty have valid concerns about assigning creative projects, especially digital ones, wondering about equitable access to tools and skills.⁵ I believe the solution to this concern lies in a process-oriented assessment rather than a content-oriented one. In his book *Intentional Technology*, Derek Bruff suggests that one of the keys to unlocking student learning is making that learning “audible.”⁶ How do you “hear” student learning? Ask students to describe their experience in a process paper, which invites students to reflect on the choices they made and dig deeper into the whys of those choices. I typically ask students to give me just a few pages of explanation to accompany their creative projects.

With a process paper in hand, faculty don’t need to be an expert in liturgical dance, TikTok, podcasting, or graphic novels (all translations done by my students!). There is no need to assess the quality of the creative medium—the process paper represents the majority of their project grade. In this way, faculty can focus on assessing how a student’s translation explored concepts from class and made them accessible to a new audience. I submit that these creative projects not only foster equity in the classroom space; they also empower students to be public intellectuals, connecting with (and learning from) communities beyond the academy.

⁵ It is interesting to note many faculty voice equity concerns about student access to digital projects, but rarely turn the same eye to traditional research papers.

⁶ Derek Bruff, *Intentional Tech: Principles to Guide the Use of Educational Technology in College Teaching* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 68–70.

Chisme and Spanglish as a Pedagogical Tools

Yanitsa Buendia de Llaca, California Polytechnic State University

My Spanish is my third birthday party. Half of it is memory, the other half is that photograph on the fridge.

—Melissa Lozada-Olivia, "[My Spanish](#)"

Racializing Spanish

As a scholar who studies race and religion, I know the categories of race and religion have created discrimination and marginalization in different institutions and at a systemic level. Although race and religion are two different categories, they both have served to create racial and ethnic boundaries of the colonizer/colonized, civilized/savage, and more-human/less-human. In education, multilingual and accented students can get discriminated against because they don't fit the Anglo-Saxon model. Language (how you speak and write) is a telling element from K-12 to universities and graduate programs. Language creates questions of assimilation and whiteness that can determine very material and pragmatic things, such as getting a better grade, a job, or a promotion. "Sounding White" has become a tool that people of color use when wanting to enter institutions.

Although some people have the privilege of disguising their language the same way some people may have the privilege to pass as White, not everyone is able to contextually change their accent or writing (and some people deliberately choose not to do so). As an instructor with accented English, I know I cannot pass as "American." This marker, however, does not make me different or distant from my students. On the contrary, I have learned how to use it to create proximity and care and to help students to explore their linguistic diversity within the classroom, as I feel compelled to share with my students my personal background and origins.

Spanish in the US has been racialized and put into the context of being a lesser language, one that is not scientific, not academic, and not appropriate for the "White public space."¹ Although Spanish has historically been boxed as a private/family language, Spanish-speaker students who learn in both Spanish and English use Spanglish as a "creative, skillful, and intelligent" tool to create nuanced meanings and solidarity.² Unfortunately, bilingual education ends after high school, and despite the efforts made by Hispanic Learning Institutions (HSIs), bilingual students are not able to continue developing their education in both languages (unless they minor in Spanish).

In this essay, I share two strategies I have developed over the last few years to help bilingual students to continue developing not only their linguistic abilities but also their critical thinking in both languages. Helping students express themselves in the way they feel the most comfortable helps not only their self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-worth, but also the ways in which they engage with critical thinking, solving problems, and creativity.

Chisme during Office Hours

I met Sol during my second year of graduate school. I was her TA once, and then to my surprise she kept appearing in my classes and office hours for over a year. Sol was a math major taking

¹ Jane H. Hill, "Language, Race, and White Public Space," *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 3 (September 1998): 680–89, here 681.

² Ramón Antonio Martínez, "'Spanglish' as a Literacy Tool: Toward an Understanding of the Potential Role of Spanish-English Code-Switching in the Development of Academic Literacy," *Research in the Teaching of English* 45, no. 2 (November 2010): 124–49, here 131.

religious studies and Chicana/o studies classes following my teaching TA schedule. I thought it was weird, but I didn't want to question her educational decisions. Maybe she was thinking on minoring, or maybe she would switch majors? Sol would jump into my office with a big smile and say to me with no shame: "I am here for the *chisme*." And we would talk. About the class. About her challenges as a woman in STEM and a DACA student. And about "silly" things such as what we had done last weekend or how annoying a roommate was. One time I found the courage to tell her she did not have to take the classes I was TAing to see me and that she could just come to my office for the *chisme*. But my assumptions were wrong. She was not coming for the *chisme*; she was engaging in mentorship practices that she was unable to find in her own major.

Chisme is not "chit-chat." *Chisme* is translated into English as "gossip." *Chisme*, in both the Spanish and English, has no place in academic settings. *Chisme* is meant for the family and private life, and it is usually women who engage in this "vain" practice of talking about one another without the consent of the person they are referencing. But Sol was learning and wanting to learn. Sol reminded me that *chisme* was also storytelling and a way of creating community bonds. So, when Sol was telling me she was coming into my office for the *chisme*, she was not telling me she wanted to gossip; she was telling me she wanted guidance in her academic career as a first-generation student. Sol taught me that *chisme* was a tool for students (and me as an instructor) to connect, to build knowledge, and to help one another thrive.

After reflecting on Sol's interactions, I have welcomed other students into my office hours. For some, this can be "entertaining"; for others it is a valuable space in which they expand the knowledge they learn in class and where they explore their own thinking and careers. The pedagogical tool of *chisme* is not exclusive to Spanish-speaker students. Any student is always welcome to use that time in the most meaningful way. Some students are businesslike and have specific questions they want to solve; others are figuring things out. Since I had mentors who allowed me to figure things out aloud when I was not making sense of anything, I give back by using the same practice. I construct a safe space where students can be confused and receive feedback or just be listened to.

Se habla, pero también Spanglish (I Speak Spanish, but Also Spanglish)

As within my office hours, I invite students to use the vernacular language of their choice. I create an environment where language is not penalized but celebrated as a means of communication. For many students who have been racialized and marginalized because of the use or trace of Spanish, having the opportunity to express themselves and be assessed in Spanish can be a powerful and healing experience.

Assessment in classes on religious studies and ethnic studies can (when I teach classes smaller than sixty people) give me as an instructor and the students the opportunity to assess through nontraditional means. Instead of exams or traditional writing, I ask students to create an unessay as a way of reflecting and expressing their knowledge in nontraditional forms.³ Assignments such as the unessay help bridge the gap between different learning styles and cultural differences among students of color and international students.

In addition to nontraditional assignments, I give students the opportunity to write, speak, and express themselves in Spanish, Spanglish, or vernacular English. For Spanish-speaking students the opportunity to use Spanish, a language that has been thought of as private in the US, breaks parameters of exclusion and domination. Spanish has given my students the possibility of relearning in a language that is private, familiar, and includes it as an academic and scientific

³ Emily Suzanne Clark, "The Unessay," Researching and Teaching American Religions (blog), 2016, <https://esclark.hcommons.org/the-unessay/>; Tomeka Wilcher, "Authentic Assessment: Exploring the 'Unessay' Option," Center for Faculty Development News, Old Dominion University, July 2020, <https://www.odu.edu/facultydevelopment/news/2020/7/authenticassessment>.

language. Spanish is their emotions and memories, but also their rationale and logic. Reconciling both worlds is healing and aids students with the creative process of learning.

Conclusions

In California and all over the country, the increase of Latinx populations has made institutions challenge the way in which they are serving these students. The HIS label is meant to signal that these institutions will be welcoming and have resources for Hispanic students. “Hispanic” students, however, come from diverse backgrounds, which is not always grasped. A Hispanic student is usually traceable and racialized because of a family connection to Latin America or Spain. Hispanic students are diverse. These students can be immigrants, undocumented, third-generation, Indigenous, and/or international students. Some may not even use Spanish as their first language.

Offering Spanish as a refuge is not perfect and would not fit every student. However, it offers a reconciliation to those whose Spanish has been crushed and invisibilized. Similar to Asao B. Inoue’s proposal of not grading writing in English through racist and colonizing parameters, I allow students to explore Spanish as a healing practice, instead of boxing and “correcting” their language practices. Spanish, like English, can be the language of the colonized, and it is our responsibility as educators to stop policing linguistic practices that are racist and ableist.

Chisme as an underlying pedagogy of care also supports ideas of healing, exploration, and learning through different means outside the classroom. As bell hooks puts it: “to heal the splitting of mind and body, we marginalized and oppressed people attempt to recover ourselves and our experience in language”⁴—in our native tongues, in the language of the colonizer, and/or in a mix of both.

Both bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa teach us that language, race, and religion are categories that not only oppress people but also that liberate us.⁵ The classroom and equity teaching from different fronts allows us as educators to help students find spaces where they can explore their voices, grow, heal, and learn about the world and themselves.

⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2007).

Dispensing with the Prison of Grading Rubrics

Ann Burlein, Hofstra University

“A Classroom Is Well Named.” Thirty years ago my graduate student reading group read this article by John Raines, and its provocation has haunted me ever since.¹ It has floated on the edge of my consciousness as I listen to students talk about what their burden of debt means for the life choices that seem possible to them. It rears its head with every article published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* detailing how, far from offering upward mobility, college education solidifies inequalities.²

A primary technology by which socioeconomic divisions mask as meritocracy is the grading rubric. My usual grading rubric is certainly not designed so that all students have access to the resources they need to succeed! Instead, its tablet of values encodes an interlocking series of privileges:

- the cultural resources and security one must have to entertain the possibility of original thinking, which is my conventional requirement for an A;
- the time such thinking requires;
- the image of knowledge it presupposes, which is to say, what students think they are doing when they are thinking; and
- the forms of physical and cognitive ability such writing presumes.

At their best, grading rubrics identify specific skill sets, alerting students to how they can move up to a higher level: how they can better play the game of grades. At their worst, rubrics are a winnowing mechanism that enshrines various kinds of access (physical, economic, cultural) as intelligence.

Ungrading addresses this inequity by asking each student to discern how they want to be intelligent in relation to course materials. Its virtue lies in how it encourages students to develop metacognition by reflecting on how they learn, what obstacles they face, how they respond to feedback, and where this class fits into their future.

The best introduction to this pedagogy is Susan Blum’s edited volume *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*.³ I recommend this volume primarily because it includes such a range of contributors. Frankly, I learned as much about what I wanted to do from authors whose philosophy and course content is quite different from my own as I learned from authors whose ideas and exercises I took directly. There are professors who use ungrading in subjects with clear-cut answers, such as mathematics. There are professors who give students whatever grade they assign themselves, no questions asked; as someone at a teaching university, the latter would feel like abdicating my responsibility. Discomfort helped me distinguish what I am willing to let go of in my conventional grading rubric and what I am not.

I teach in a private university of six thousand undergraduates in the Northeast. Like many similar institutions, we are currently experiencing a shift restructuring the liberal arts to support majors with a clear vocational terminus. By encouraging me to identify what I can leave up to student interests and what I cannot, ungrading is helping me negotiate this shift. While I do not use

¹ John C. Raines, “A Classroom Is Well Named,” *Crosscurrents* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 228–36, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/Raines.htm>.

² For example, Richard V. Reeves, “Colleges and the End of Upward Mobility,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.chronicle.com/package/how-colleges-deepen-inequality/>.

³ Susan Blum, *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

ungrading in all my courses, ungrading is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a huge range of course content and structure. I have experimented with ungrading in general education courses, which we cap at thirty-seven students and which enroll students for a bewildering range of reasons that I often cannot foresee; but I have also used ungrading in more focused courses that students take with clear vocational goals in mind (such as the many different courses I offer connecting religion and medicine).

Here's how I do it:

- Students write a beginning series of low-stakes assignments that set the baseline of my expectations. Sometimes students write brief reading take-aways in which they articulate in their own words what they think the author wanted them to take away from the article we read. Other times students write short, informal essays in which they wrestle with the main concepts on which we will focus. Because students can misinterpret the open-endedness of this approach as laxity, it helps to clearly identify the skills and content with which students must engage in order to succeed. This initial scaffolding is especially important in classes that have a critical mass of students from preprofessional schools. The image of knowledge brought by students from disciplines outside the humanities can be quite instrumental, making it crucial to include an initial assignment that gives them a taste of forms of learning that are more on the liberal arts end of the spectrum.
- Students then write their own learning goals.
- Students design an assignment that will enable them to utilize the course materials to meet one or more of those goals.
- After completing the assignment, students assess their own learning through a metacognitive writing assignment, which they turn in with every paper and which I use to guide my comments.
- Repeat.

When I read student work, rather than assigning a letter grade, I give detailed feedback in relation to what they have written in the accompanying metacognitive exercise. One of the things I like about this pedagogy is the way it changes the nature of the feedback I give. Rather than writing comments to justify a grade, I tend to give less feedback that is, however, more direct and even blunt. My goal is to help them improve in an intellectual task they have identified as an issue with which they want assistance.

Because there is no letter grade, students have to actually read my comments and then figure out a response, which could be a revision, a paper conference, an email, or a paragraph in the metacognitive essay that they write for their next paper. At the end of the course, students complete a form that walks them through each of the assignments that makes up their final grade, asking them to reflect on what they learned in each assignment from the perspective of the end of the course. They conclude by assigning themselves a letter grade and writing out their rationale, which we then discuss in a five-minute meeting during the exam period. Given that so much of our behaviors around grading are about erecting protective and defensive boundaries so as not to feel (at least publicly) the exclusions perpetuated by the educational system, ungrading tends to make the classroom more vulnerable. As a result, my role in this meeting is usually to validate the deeper issues in learning with which they are struggling, such as the slow process of changing one's mind, the resistance to realizing that feedback is not failure, the difficulty of heeding one's own voice. If I think a student has graded themselves too highly, I send an advance email asking them to consider the aspect of their work that I think they are ignoring, so that they are prepared to talk about that issue when we meet.

Out of all the pedagogical techniques that I have tried since reading Raines' article, ungrading has made the biggest difference: it directly addresses how our practices of examination make education a disciplinary institution in Michel Foucault's sense of the term.⁴ In Foucault's work on ethics, he coins the term *counter-conduct* to express the way that critique can pry open space for change in unjust institutions by asking: By whom do we consent to have our conduct directed? How do we want to be conducted? Toward what do we want to be led? For what reason, in what way, and to what end?⁵ These are the questions that ungrading foregrounds.

While ungrading does not eliminate educational inequities, its structure encourages students to determine (at least some of) how they want to be governed by a system of truth. As a result, ungrading has changed my teaching practice, even when I am not using it, because of how it shifts the dynamics of the classroom by putting the responsibility for learning where it belongs: on students. Rather than assessing students by an abstract image of "good thinking," ungrading has enabled me to embody my twin beliefs that all people are smart and that there is value in expertise: by dispensing with the class logic of rubrics, ungrading recognizes that thinking well is always a matter of thinking well in different ways and contexts, for different ends and means.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory Population*, ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 197; Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lisa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 41–82.

Antigone in the Pandemic

Ada Jaarsma, Mount Royal University

When I first began creating an online course during the pandemic, I landed on its themes quite readily: I would anchor the curriculum in an ancient text, and I'd craft lessons to be as accessible as possible, creating videos with full transcripts and a range of writing exercises. Since graduate school, I had dreamed about an introductory course on Sophocles' *Antigone*; I'd been tracking retellings, emerging steadily from around the world. I decided to pair [Anne Carson's translation of the play](#) with a novel ([Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*](#)) and a film ([Antigone](#)), alongside a virtual performance ([Antigone in Ferguson](#)) and short film ([Antigone in Staten Island](#)).¹ The novel, set in England and centering on Pakistani immigrants, and the film, set in Quebec and centering on Algerian immigrants, displace the Eurocentrism of much of the scholarship and invite scrutiny of the norms of citizenship that—in my own settler state of Canada—too often go unnoticed. The performance, in turn, looks to public mourning as redress for racialized injustice, animating the play through Black Lives Matter; the short film shifts the play into a comedy, querying family as a site of hope for Gen-Z students. I'd strive for equity by way of representation, so that students might find themselves reflected in voices, stories, and shared experiences.

I tend to relate to classes as endeavors of belonging: to curate a slate of texts and experiences that *any student* who might show up will be able to connect with, learn from, be challenged by. It wasn't until I was reading [Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters*](#), though, that I started to wrestle with other meanings of “equity” in teaching. Crawley uses a phrase—“placeholders for desired connection”²—as a descriptor for what readers might encounter as they read *The Lonely Letters*. It's such a compellingly *relational* phrase. And it shifted my attention from the *what* of the course to its *how*. Crucial as content is, as a way to work for equity for students who want and deserve to engage with pluralistic voices in curriculum, Crawley's passage stopped me from assuming that such encounters might be generalizable, across the students enrolled in the course.

This idea that students might notice different placeholders, or “signposts for feeling,” as Crawley explains, as they read, watch, and work through texts—this adds something important to how I'd been working with universal design for learning. [“Universal instructional design”](#) refers to a set of seven principles, adapted from architecture, that seek to expand access in classrooms, curriculum, and activities as much as possible; these principles include ideals such as flexibility and consistency.³ In a way, we might consider universal design principles as placeholders for accessibility: we might embed flexibility and transparency into assignments, for example, and create tangible feedback loops so that students can name barriers that we can work together to transform. In addition to addressing the needs of individual students (for extra time on exams, or for additional forms of media or presentation), a course or a lesson designed through universal design invites every student to encounter learning through all of these options and more. Learning

¹ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Anne Carson (London: Oberon Books, 2015); Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2018); *Antigone*, dir. Sophie Deraspe (Maison 4:3, 2019); *Antigone in Ferguson*, dir. Brian Doerries (2020); *Sophocles in Staten Island*, dir. Jack Tamburri (2020).

² Ashon Crawley, *The Lonely Letters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 8.

³ For a wide-ranging conversation about universal design, equity, and pedagogy, see an event that I moderated, “Universal Design in the Classroom: Inclusivity and Hospitality,” hosted by the Friends Association of Higher Education, February 22, 2022, <https://quakerfahe.com/quaker-leadings-in-higher-education-series/#February-2022>.

itself opens up into a kind of prompt or query for us as teachers. What might learning turn into when a student can have unlimited time for an open-book exam and when we name access as a collective endeavor?

This is where Crawley's phrase "placeholders for desired connection" made me feel more on the hook, as a teacher, for how I was designing my new course. Crawley's reflections in *The Lonely Letters* on what it means to belong—and what it means to know that you do not belong—hit me hard, as someone who approaches pedagogy as a kind of ongoing art practice (what Gert Biesta calls "educational artistry").⁴ Here's the crux: when we are in the throes of a semester, there is no "any student at all." Rather, there is *this* student, and *that* student; students with a whole host of backgrounds, hang-ups, learning styles, and culturally formative perspectives. This is where generalizing about "all students" hits a wall, where even universal design faces a challenge—of reaching *this* student and *that* student, through their own affective and somatic perspectives. These perspectives themselves might well be shifting, especially in times of anxiety and alienation such as a pandemic.⁵

I'd been drafting my syllabus as a description of content: I pointed to *Antigone* translations that we'd be studying and set out a rhythm for our term together. Following Crawley's cues, I began to add prose that might turn this content into open-ended encounters. "The play will prompt us to do philosophy ourselves," I wrote. "We'll relate to each character in the play as 'placeholders for desired connection,' which means that we'll bring our own queries, commitments, and desires to the play and, in turn, subject them to wide-ranging analysis." This latter point is what draws me, as the teacher, into the "how" of the course. I began crafting exercises to culminate in a project in which each student would create their own "translation" of *Antigone*, based on the different kinds of desired connections they'd been tracking throughout the term.

As I began to describe the course along these more relational lines, my own signposts for feeling became more recognizable to me. The main activity that I was invoking, as the bridge between students and desired connections, was reading—something that I had yet to reckon with directly. So, together with a close friend and a student, I produced an animated video: "[How \(and Why\) to read Antigone.](#)" This visual text became the first assigned text in our course; more importantly, as a small project, it offered me an opportunity to pause and elaborate the question: why reading, as the way to notice and nurture desires and connections?

As Crawley's phrase suggests, a voice in a text can proffer all kinds of desired connections. Students might discover desires for ethical belonging (to families, communities, nation-states, other networks), for sexual/erotic/romantic relations (with strangers, lovers, friends, themselves), for existential belonging (to their pasts, futures, imaginations). A voice can also index broken attachments, and I added more content—a short story by [Indigenous poet Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Robert,"](#) about the eros of breakups; [an interview with trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher](#) about violence and boundaries of community.⁶ These additions to the course expanded the scope of desire to include ambivalence, heartbreak, and grief.

⁴ Gert Biesta, *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2021), vii.

⁵ Ada S. Jaarsma, "Pandemic Pedagogy," *Quaker Higher Education* 15, no. 2 (2022), https://www.academia.edu/73040813/Pandemic_Pedagogy_January_2022_Quaker_Higher_Education.

⁶ Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Robert," in *A History of My Body* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2021), 113–24; Talia Bettcher and Pelagia Goulimari, "Theorizing Closeness: A Trans Feminist Conversation," *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22 (2017): 49–60, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0969725X.2017.1285608?journalCode=cang20>.

“I’m a strange new kind of inbetween thing aren’t I,” Antigone muses in Sophocles’ play.⁷ As we rethink our canons, we can tune more into the strange-making promise of course creation. For students, learning might be less about belonging to my class for a term and more about feeling and thinking otherwise. For teachers, teaching might become a set of exercises in which our own placeholders turn into sites of inquiry and perhaps new desired connections.

⁷ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 39.

Developing Academically Rigorous Classrooms

Miguel A. De La Torre, Iliff School of Theology

Having taught at a conservative four-year undergraduate institution and currently teaching at a liberal graduate theological school, I have concluded that when it comes to scholars of color, Euro-American conservatives often question the purity of our faith, while liberals question the depths of our intelligence. Scholars of color frequently witness their scholarship dismissed as “being more activist oriented than academic,” “an interesting perspective for an elective class,” “too subjective,” or “lacking complexity.” In the minds of many Euro-American colleagues, those of us who occupy bodies of color are often scorned for supposedly lacking academic rigor or are believed to have been hired to meet real or imagined token diversity targets. Yet, here is the irony: professors who fail to incorporate the voices of minoritized communities, who refuse to include perspectives that emanate from communities of color in their syllabi, in their scholarship, in their lectures, or in their writings—regardless as to which Ivy League school granted their doctorate—are the ones in fact who lack academic excellence. Pedagogy or scholarship cannot be considered sophisticated when professors continue to construe, construct, and convey the racialization of their discipline by maintaining the absence of works by scholars of color.

A pedagogical deficiency exists whenever Euro-American professors remain complicit with the prevailing racism and ethnic discrimination at both conservative and liberal institutions when they relegate our voices, our thoughts, and our bodies to the margins. Students assigned to classrooms taught by Euro-American professors are disadvantaged when the theoretical perspectives of the soon-to-be US majority are absent. According to 2020 Census demographic projections, Euro-Americans will cease being the majority by 2044, representing 49.7 percent of the population. Today, in many states and counties, they already represent the minority (although not in power, privilege, or profit, of course). Any professor or institution of higher education ignoring the perspectives of communities of color does so at their own peril. Why? Because the religious and ethical questions, concerns, and dilemmas faced by communities of color are already the questions, concerns, and dilemmas faced by all of America. To continue to ignore these voices ensures the loss of cutting-edge academic analysis, representation, and, by extension, relevance.

The chair of my dissertation committee—the late John Raines—often reminded me that the (class)room was appropriately named, for it is indeed a room of class—a room where students learn the class to which they belong and the status (or lack thereof) that comes with that class. No question exists as to the class to which I belong, since I am a graduate of a community college. Because some students can pay enough to attend rooms of class on prestigious campuses, they will be given opportunities denied to those of us from lower economic classes. To Raines’ analysis I would add a racial and ethnic dimension, because those who have been pushed to live in lower economic classes are disproportionately of color. The (class)room becomes a colonizing space where one not only learns one’s economic place within society but also one’s racial or ethnic station. When the lectures, readings, and scholarship ignore the contributions of disenfranchised communities, when professors at the so-called top universities fail to mirror the diversity of society, the lesson learned by students is that contributions by scholars of color fall short of Eurocentric supremacy. The opposite, of course, is true. It is the *absence* of voices from the racial and ethnic margins that demonstrates a lack of strong research and academic acumen.

For my scholarship to be thorough, and by extension my pedagogy, both the syllabi from which I teach and the manuscripts I write must include the thoughts and writings of both the dominant Euro-American perspectives and my own Latinx perspective. But just as important—if not more—my scholarship would lack complexity if it did not centralize the voices of Indigenous, Black, and Asian American scholars, as well as queer and feminist voices. If contributions from marginalized communities are not present, then I do a grave disservice to my scholarship and,

more importantly, to the students in my classroom. While I can never be considered knowledgeable unless I am fluent in the Eurocentric canon, Euro-American scholars are considered among the brightest and the best when no requirement exists for them to read or know anything about the world residing on their margins. They can publish a book or two and be paraded around the department due to prevalent institutional racism, which operates in support of white affirmative action, ensuring job opportunities and promotions often denied to better qualified and more knowledgeable scholars of color. Ignoring their margins creates an academic milieu where esteemed Eurocentric thinkers continue to be elevated, even though since the so-called Age of Enlightenment, their scholarship was purposely constructed to remove from humanity all who fell short of whiteness.

To build a pedagogical methodology solely on Eurocentric religious, theological, or philosophical thought is to produce an epistemology on shifting sand. Worse, when the focus in the classroom is exclusively on Eurocentric thought, students' ability to grasp reality is undermined. Bringing the perspectives of communities of color into the classroom is not some empty exercise in political correctness, nor is it an inconvenient attempt at tokenism. It is a methodology that halts the regurgitation of death-dealing Eurocentric theoretical paradigms detrimental to the world's marginalized. It is a praxis concerned with understanding the world, and just as important, transforming the world.

Thankfully, not all Euro-American professors are stuck in the rut of designing their classes or writing their scholarship solely from the Eurocentric perspective. Many reject the temptation of academic laziness by investing their time into learning from their racial/ethnic Others. They seek to learn and incorporate the scholarship being produced on the margins, making them the Euro-American scholars I would want to call colleagues! They recognize they can never speak for us or in our place—even if they are married to a person of color or have adopted children of color. Because they create syllabi, they employ this power to make space for disenfranchised voices to speak for themselves. They are cognizant of the contributions made by communities of color and how such contributions inform their own thinking, willing to become vulnerable by how they share their complicity with institutionalized academic racism and ethnic discrimination. Their vulnerability models for their students how to honestly and humbly wrestle with their complicities. This inclusive approach to teaching makes them more effective in the classroom.

Consciousness-raising pedagogy must entail a response to how the discipline has been racialized. Effective teaching leads students to occupy the uncomfortable space of the disenfranchised, a starting point from which to approach religious studies. Becoming vulnerable while exploring complicity is not for the sake of either establishing or increasing feelings of guilt, for such feelings accomplish nothing for those minoritized. Engaging with these uncomfortable spaces is to move beyond the recognition of complicity toward a praxis that contributes to the very dismantling of the structures designed to unfairly privilege the dominant culture.

For example, because I occupy a male body, I recognize I am a recovering sexist. How can I not be, growing up within two misogynist cultures? No matter how much of a flaming feminist I may think I am, occupying this cisgender male body means I will benefit from social structures that will pay me more than a woman of color or hear my voice first. No matter how much I may stand in solidarity with women of color in the struggle for liberation, I can always fall off the wagon and fail to speak about my complicity when my voice needs to be lifted. Shedding crocodile tears does not help. Recognizing my complicity and using the gender privilege I possess to dismantle the very structures constructed to privilege my maleness becomes the necessary response. In the same way, my Euro-American colleagues wishing to stand in solidarity with those on their margins must first recognize how they are recovering racists and how, within the room of class which they occupy, what is required is not self-flagellation but praxis that dismantles the very academic structures designed to privilege them.

Courses taught by Euro-Americans must be designed to bring their suppositions into conversation with those who are usually dismissed as having nothing to offer the intellectual discourse, specifically those who reject basing their worldview on Eurocentric knowledge. To include perspectives from dispossessed communities becomes more crucial than books published by Euro-American “experts.” One token book on the syllabus will always be insufficient. If most of the population is of color, then to be relevant, the authors of the books assigned in any given course should proportionately reflect the diversity of society. At this point Euro-American scholars ask, if not demand, that those on the margins provide a list of books to include in their syllabi, as if it is our responsibility to become tutors for the dominant academic culture. Solving the problem of our exclusion becomes our responsibility. May I instead suggest that those Euro-American scholars who obtained a PhD put to good use the research skills learned and figure out how to bring their syllabi into the twenty-first century? They created the problem by excluding our voices for centuries, and it is up to them to resolve it.

Teaching or publishing ceases to be how views are expressed in the economic marketplace of scholarly opinions. To teach and to publish becomes a way to hear the voice of the voiceless—to shout from the mountaintop what commonly is only heard by and among communities of color—to verbalize what the dispossessed are feeling and doing. No doubt, such a methodology will anger those accustomed to hearing their own voices first, viewing their academic status as a birthright. Teaching in solidarity with those on the margins of society becomes the way that consciousness-raising occurs for students and for the professor: a way by which to develop academically rigorous classrooms.

Claim Your Assets! Disrupting Deficiency Pedagogies in Classrooms

Julie Mavity Maddalena, Lakeland University

My university, in the middle of a Midwestern cornfield, attracts a diverse group of students primarily from rural Wisconsin and Iowa as well as the nearby urban centers of Milwaukee, Chicago, and Detroit. We have a high percentage of first-generation BIPOC students, many of whom struggle, with a concerning number leaving in their first year. While multiple dynamics contribute to this, we believe a key factor involves the ways many of our classrooms center privileged forms of educational preparation and knowledge. Not only does this pedagogical practice bias faculty in their interactions with students and the ways we structure courses, but it also undermines the confidence of first-generation BIPOC students who internalize the message that they are entering the classroom with deficiencies based on their homes, communities, and educational experiences.

Tara J. Yosso's model of community cultural wealth subverts this "deficiencies model" of education built around assumptions about "'disadvantaged' students whose race and background class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital."¹ Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), Yosso identifies six forms of "cultural wealth" that recognize the particular kinds of knowledge BIPOC students tend to bring into classrooms from their homes and communities. Using this frame, students create an "asset map" that invites them to identify and claim their own cultural wealth at the beginning of my classes. Then, throughout the semester, I build in references to their asset maps in various ways, inviting the students to build on their maps and identify ways their cultural wealth contributes important knowledge in various spheres.

To begin, I outline Yosso's forms of capital that create cultural capital and, overall, cultural wealth. Yosso's forms of capital include aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. Examples of each include the following: "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers,"² as evidenced in a first-generation student's enrollment in college; communication skills gleaned from living in a bilingual household or community and code-switching in a variety of contexts; the capacity to navigate complicated kinship ties and the knowledge gleaned from engagement with various community groups that uphold cultural identity; experiences of creatively networking to access opportunities, find support, and problem solve; and the knowledge and skills gained from resisting oppressive structures and forces.

In addition to Yosso's areas of cultural capital, I invite students to identify other assets around clubs, organizations, sports, passions, interests, creative expression, and team and project skills. Examples here include leadership and persistence skills developed through athletics, and creativity and communication demonstrated through music, poetry, and art. I ask them to think about strengths they are proud of and also encourage them to think about aspects of their lives others might label as negatives. How can the challenges of our lives develop positive traits? For instance, a student with divorced parents may have developed strong mediation skills. A student who has experienced other difficulties may have highly developed intuition or strong powers of observation.

Students can get as creative as they'd like with their maps. I show them a basic example, with themselves in a circle in the center and lines to assets stretching out around the circle, and let them know they can stay basic or introduce colors and designs however they would like. However

¹ Tara J. Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8 (2005): 69–91.

² Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

they choose to create their asset map, I ask them to leave room so they can expand on their assets as they get more used to thinking in this way. I incorporate these maps into classes differently. In my Christian Faith and Social Justice course, after they have created their initial maps students identify the assets they would bring to social justice organizations they are analyzing for research papers. They write several of these analysis papers throughout the semester, and they tend to grow in their confidence in asserting what they would bring to an organization, particularly as they identify more of their own assets.

When we team up for social justice projects, they begin by sharing their assets with each other, strategizing how they will utilize their group's assets to share the work and maximize impact. Asset mapping incorporated into group projects has been shown to create stronger, more collaborative group work because it functions to overcome stereotypes, minimize bias, and build confidence.³ Using Yosso's categories of cultural capital in these maps specifically undermines the "deficiencies" model, which disproportionately impacts BIPOC students.

Anecdotally, when students take another class with me, their next asset map is often expanded, with more nuance and detail. They come into class expecting their strengths and their knowledge to be recognized and valued in concrete ways. While I lack the data to speak to whether this one modest assignment affects persistence or confidence in a quantitative way, I believe it aligns with a liberative pedagogy that resists oppressive structures and practices in higher education.

³ Geoffrey Pfeifer and Elisabeth A. Stoddard, "Equitable and Effective Teams: Creating and Managing Team Dynamics for Equitable Learning Outcomes," in *Beyond All Expectations: Project-Based Learning in the First Year*, ed. Kristin Wobbe and Elisabeth A. Stoddard (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019).

Dialogue and Equity in the Religious Studies Classroom

Kevin Minister, Shenandoah University

Most students who identify as white tended to shrink in their chairs and avoid eye contact whenever my classes discussed race. Naming this dynamic and the privilege associated with being able to evade speaking about race changed little. Discomfort still dripped from their downturned eyes and shoulders. I could see how this shifted responsibility for the discussion disproportionately onto students of color and caused many students to disengage. Things finally changed when I began teaching through dialogue, normalizing the expectation that everyone in the class would speak to the course content in light of their experiences. Engaging the work of racial and religious equity through dialogue requires all students to reflect on how these issues connect to their lives, to name their own commitments to pursuing equity, and to become more comfortable in discussing issues of equity.

My approach to dialogue comes from training in [Reflective Structured Dialogue](#) (RSD), developed by Essential Partners. RSD uses timed reflection and responses to questions aimed to create mutual understanding by eliciting complex stories from participants' lived experience that have influenced their values, commitments, and ideas. Those stories become the foundation for a curious conversation about different perspectives. Because *dialogue* is grounded in structured reflection on the experiences of all participants in relation to the course content, it differs from my class *discussions*, which invite voluntary analysis of ideas in a free-flowing format that may not involve reflection on personal experience. As Lauren Barthold observes, "The result is that in dialogue there is a re-orientation towards underlying meanings and values that expose a fundamental human connection with the other; our stories about others, about ourselves, and about the nature of our relationship begin to change."¹ I have come to employ dialogic pedagogy in all of my courses at Shenandoah University, most of which are offered as part of the general education curriculum for our two thousand undergraduate students pursuing professionalized degree programs oriented toward healthcare, the performing arts, education, and business.²

A full description of how to implement a culture of dialogue and practice RSD in religious studies classrooms is beyond the scope of this short essay, but curious readers can learn about the structures of RSD and how to use RSD in the religious studies classroom in articles by Jill DeTemple and John Sarrouf.³ In this piece, I will focus on how teaching through dialogue has helped me work toward equity in my REL 203 classroom, a course focused on civic cooperation in light of Christian normativity and white supremacy in the US. Dialogue has created learning experiences that more equitably engage all students and facilitate students' self-reflective connection of issues of white supremacy and Christian normativity with their own lives and communities.

During the first semester that I implemented dialogue in the course, I quickly realized that much of my lecture materials were redundant to what the students had surfaced in their small

¹ Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square: Civic Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4.

² While the majority of my teaching is done in general education courses of approximately twenty students, I have colleagues who employ similar dialogic pedagogy in a variety of contexts, ranging from large, sixty-plus-student introductory courses to small doctoral seminars and including liberal arts colleges, research universities, and professional schools.

³ See Jill DeTemple and John Sarrouf, "Disruption, Dialogue, and Swerve: Reflective Structured Dialogue in Religious Studies Classrooms," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 20 (July 2017): 283–92; and Jill DeTemple et al., "Reflective Structured Dialogue: A Conversation with 2018 American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award Winner Jill DeTemple." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22 (June 2019): 223–34. For those who might be interested in training on using RSD in academic contexts, I encourage you to see trainings available on the Essential Partners website (whatisessential.org) or to reach out to Essential Partners to discuss the possibility of creating a training for your campus context.

group dialogues. Not only are dialogues a vastly more engaging and memorable way of learning about these issues, but, because the students approached the topics through their own experiences, there was a greater variety of experiences reflected in the course that connected with the diversity of values and concerns that the students had about the topics. Dialogue practices break down the sense of the teacher as the source and arbiter of knowledge and the students as disembodied, objective learners through questions that require students to connect their own experiences to course content. Furthermore, students begin to perceive each other as partners in learning as they reflect on how their and their classmates' different experiences inform their perspectives on the course content. When I write dialogue questions, I never ask whether or not inequality exists—it does. Instead, in conversation with the course material about the realities of inequality, my dialogue questions invite reflection on the students' experiences that influence their awareness of situations of inequality, the causes that create and perpetuate inequality, the challenges to addressing inequality, the reasons they care about working toward equity, or the ways they see people working toward equity.

I still remember the student who shared with me at the midterm,
 At first, I really disliked going to class and having to participate in RSD because I normally never speak up in class or participate much, which is unfortunate. After a while, I got tired of not understanding so I put in more effort into doing the readings for homework and I started to really love RSD. . . . From discussing and listening with my classmates I can better identify and comprehend the nuances of things like the problems in healthcare, the need for religious diversity in education, and issues with cultural differences and understanding.

Dialogue empowered this student's shift from evading the course content because they did not feel like they had anything to contribute toward a deeper engagement with the course content, their peers' perspectives, and their own ideas.

Like all new situations, upon entering the classroom, students naturally assess their social status and form expectations for their place in the group and how they will be treated. Because our classrooms inherit the inequitable power dynamics of the contexts in which we teach, we must intentionally create policies and practices that help students trust that they will be respected, be treated fairly, have a say in the learning process, and meaningfully connect to the group. In a systematic review of studies on the use and outcomes of RSD in communities, researchers found that the structures RSD employs “were responsible not only for encouraging participants to embrace different perspectives, but for redistributing power dynamics to be of a more equitable nature.”⁴ When employed throughout a course, “students almost universally reported a strong sense of belonging in class.”⁵

Using dialogue practices has changed who speaks and the diversity of perspectives that are shared, creating a more equitable engagement with all voices present in the classrooms. This starts on day one by inviting the students to introduce themselves in a way that subverts the hierarchies of traditional academic credentialing (e.g., major, year of study, etc.). To begin REL 203 with a concrete and appreciative sense that we are all products of our social relations, I ask students to “Share a story about someone who influenced why you are here and how that person influenced your purpose, values, or goals.” I facilitate the creation of a course agreement with each class that reflects what they need to expect from one another, to aspire toward collectively,

⁴ Katherine Gower, Llewellyn Cornelius, Raye Rawls, and Brandy B. Walker, “Reflective Structured Dialogue: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 37 (2020): 217.

⁵ This observation is based on a quantitative and qualitative study of classrooms employing RSD at least three times during the semester across multiple disciplines and universities. Jill DeTemple, “The Spaces We Make: Dialogic Classrooms and Social Transformation,” *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution* 35 (2019–2020): 760.

and to expect from me as the instructor in order for them to be able to bring their full selves to the classroom. Agreements for dialogic engagement are one way to counter power imbalances.⁶

I begin most class meetings with a question that asks students to share in small groups about an experience that relates to the course content, such as, ““What are you doing right now to keep yourself in ‘good health’ during the pandemic?” Questions such as this one both reconnect the students to each other around a personally significant issue and surface the variety of things that go into their different understandings of health on a day dedicated to examining how religious and cultural differences influence people’s understandings of health.

The practice of taking a minute for silent reflection after each dialogic question creates greater procedural equality by giving everyone time to gather their thoughts, changing not only who is prepared to respond but also the quality of the responses. When we use timers to measure and limit each student’s response to dialogue questions, the class creates structural equality among students’ voices. One student wrote that what they valued about dialogue in REL 203 was that “it was set up in a way where no one person could take over the conversation, and no one person would get lost in the mix.”

Dialogue can create invaluable shifts in affect, ideas, and relationships. As one student observed at the end of the semester, “I’ve become passionate about a lot of the things that [my classmates] care about.” While dialogue alone is never enough, “dialogue is an initial step for soliciting others in the collective project of building better worlds as opposed to a narrow focus that involves only changing individual beliefs.”⁷

⁶ Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square*, 88.

⁷ Barthold, *Overcoming Polarization in the Public Square*, 149.

Celebrating BIPOC Exemplars: Pursuing Equity within and beyond the Classroom

Kristyn Sessions, Villanova University

I first encountered Bettina L. Love's book *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* a few years ago. As I am a white, middle-class educator, Love's descriptions of the "spirit-murdering" experiences faced by Black and Brown students, in which schools cease to be a place of learning and become "a training site for a life of exhaustion," were both revelatory and disturbing.¹ Since then, I have sought to incorporate Love's insights into my teaching, aiming to more fully respond to "historical and contemporary patterns of educational disenfranchisement."² One tool in my repertoire is the moral exemplars project, which draws on Love's concepts of mattering and joy. Through this assignment, I pursue "just experiences and outcomes" for all students in my classroom, tailored to the predominantly white and economically privileged Roman Catholic University at which I teach.³

We Want to Do More than Survive

A brief look at Love's book illuminates both how it inspired the moral exemplars project and its overall value for equity-focused pedagogy. One of Love's key insights is the essential role of mattering, of feeling valued, for all in the classroom, but especially BIPOC students. Drawing inspiration from Ella Baker, Love suggests that one way to cultivate mattering is to create spaces for participatory democracy, in which individuals learn and grow together and focus on "a layered agenda for justice that utilize[s] everyone's skill sets to emphasize self-worth and collective liberation."⁴ More generally, devaluing narratives can be countered when students see that they and their contributions are necessary to the educational process.

In addition, Love emphasizes the need for joy in the educational experience. Love rejects manifestations of "fabricated or forced joy," untethered from lived realities.⁵ Instead, she emphasizes the joy found in activities of repair and resistance, in which individuals engage in self-love, imagine alternative futures, and build communities which authentically value diversity. While joy can take many forms, Love notes the particular importance of highlighting Black joy, celebrating when "dark people win, thrive, honor their history."⁶ In short, joy enables needed healing for some while making "the quest for justice sustainable" for all.⁷

Moral Exemplars Project

When I created the moral exemplars project for my introductory ethics course, Love's concepts of mattering and joy were foremost in my mind. At one level, the assignment serves to assess student comprehension of moral exemplarity, completing the virtue ethics section of the

¹ Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 27.

² "Overview of Equity-Focused Teaching at Michigan," Center for Research on Teaching & Learning – University of Michigan, <https://crlt.umich.edu/overview-equity-focused-teaching-michigan>.

³ "Overview of Equity-Focused Teaching at Michigan."

⁴ Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive*, 68.

⁵ Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive*, 12.

⁶ Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive*, 121.

⁷ Love, *We Want to Do More than Survive*, 120.

class. More fundamentally, this assignment highlights and seeks to disrupt one aspect of systematic inequity within the field of ethics, specifically the normative bias favoring white and cisgendered individuals as moral models.

In this assignment, students are tasked with identifying and researching an individual from a marginalized or underrepresented community whom they consider to be a moral exemplar. With the information they gather, students create an infographic, which provides an image of the exemplar, some biographical information, a description of the reasons this person is worthy of admiration or the virtues they embody, and brief language as to what is lost if we overlook this individual. Finally, in three-minute presentations, students teach the class about their individuals—their background, life, and accomplishments—to support their case that this individual is worthy of imitation. From these individual efforts, the class collectively creates an alternative pantheon of moral exemplars, one that looks different from the figures most often celebrated in our schools and religious communities. While some students are already well-acquainted with this phenomenon, for others this assignment offers an opportunity to critically reflect on why some figures are extolled while others are overlooked, though all embody important virtues.

So where do mattering and joy come in? For one, this project is not possible without student leadership; their knowledge, skills, and participation are essential. Students identify, research, and advocate for their person. Without their work, this unique collection of moral exemplars, who collectively set an enriched standard for the moral life, could not emerge.

Given the requirements of the assignment, however, mattering can be experienced differently by individual students. For some students, the responsibility of identifying an exemplar from an underrepresented community can be challenging; they struggle to think beyond familiar paradigms and models. For example, one student, a white man and committed vegan, had a difficult time identifying someone who fit assignment requirements. Eventually, he stumbled upon Seba Johnson, a vegan of color, who shared his commitments and enriched them. For these students, their experience of mattering is linked to challenging themselves to retrieve and reclaim figures who often do not share their social location.

For others, students of color in particular, the assignment becomes an opportunity to bring themselves and their experiences into the classroom in a new way. For example, last year an Asian American woman presented on Kim Bok-Dong, a human rights activist, and spoke about how important Bok-Dong was to her family and her South Korean heritage. Another student, an African American man, identified Dwyane Wade as his exemplar and talked about Wade's importance for the Black community around trans issues. For these students, mattering is connected to recognizing, in a public space, a person who is important to them but usually marginalized or overlooked. Occasionally, a student will also use the presentation to highlight a social issue they are intimately familiar with, such as the ongoing impact of police violence or anti-Asian hate.

Moreover, joy is linked to the selection process and how the individual is presented once chosen. It can be an act of joy to recognize properly those who have been ignored or excluded because they do not conform to traditional norms of exemplarity. In addition, while many of the moral exemplars endure significant hardship, noted in the infographic itself, the presentations are primarily joyful, celebrating these figures as individuals worthy of admiration and imitation. In other words, these figures are not solely defined by their struggles with racism and violence or sometimes tragic ends but recognized for offering essential moral insight and embodying creative

acts of resistance and justice. Acknowledging this larger picture is an act of joy, an affirmation of Black joy and a necessary complement to regular discussions on the realities of structural racism and bias in our world.

Concluding Reflection

While the moral exemplars project is tailored to a particular course, it could be easily adapted to different topics and learning environments. The privileging of persons from dominant social groups extends beyond who is and is not recognized as a moral exemplar. Equitable acknowledgment of all who have contributed their labor or creative work to the community is needed in a variety of fields and professions, and this is work that our students can lead. To guide such adaptations, Love's concepts of mattering and joy are invaluable. They emerge from deep attention to the worst possibilities of our educational system and proffer crucial norms for equity-focused teaching.

I Don't Want to Turn My Camera On! Creating Equitable Virtual Learning Communities

Ashlyn Strozier, Georgia State University

It's 11:00 a.m. Phones, watches, computers, tablets, and other electronic devices are alerting students to log in to their virtual classes. Students are in the middle of taking a break at work, walking into the library, dropping off children at daycare, caring for parents, waking up after the night shift, and traveling between destinations. Some are frantically gathering themselves, food, and materials for the next hour and half. Others are meandering to their device to log on while scouring their social media for the latest TikTok craze. Some students are already in their well-prepared workspace waiting for the professor to log on. What has happened to the well-ordered learning environment of the university?

The well-ordered classroom has been replaced by a computer and boxes with names. When academics imagine their classrooms, the place where they share research, engage in intellectual exercises and introduce great thinkers to students, this is not the scene they envision. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused education to become something other than what its practitioners were prepared for. Covid-19 has affected multiple aspects of the academy: conference gatherings, instruction, research presentations, and student preparedness.

The shift to virtual learning has affected higher education whether you are at a rural liberal arts college, independent seminary, or large urban university. Though the challenges are different, they all center on one focus, *equity*. For the purposes of this article, I offer a rethinking of the term *equity* to be more aligned with an “opportunity gap.” Kristen Cervantes, in her article “Taking Action on Equity Education,” posits the use of the term “opportunity gap” to highlight the disparities in resources, systems, structures, and conditions that students of color and students in poverty encounter throughout their educational careers. Moreover, she believes the term “opportunity gap” seeks to emphasize the equity among achievement opportunities for students.¹ Yes, we want equitable environments that foster opportunities for all students so *all* students can maximize their potential. I use the term *equity* to define a context in which every person has opportunities to achieve with limited external or environmental factors that affect their opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

Equity is fostered by encouraging students to engage in the learning process rather than a sole focus on the product. Design-thinking framework promotes equity with an instructional focus on process rather than product.² Design thinking is defined as a human-centered methodology that creates innovative instruction, which helps students develop twenty-first-century competencies.³ Engineering practitioners and learners have used the design-thinking instructional strategies to create equitable learning spaces because they promote decolonization in the classroom and empowerment, while dismantling barriers and creating meaningful learning situations.

Professors must shift students' energies from focusing *only* on the outcome to engaging in the process. Some students are coming from a secondary education where the focus was on preparing for the end-of-course test. If you perform on the tests, you pass the class. Therefore, creating an equitable virtual learning community requires students to engage in a semester learning journey, not completing meaningless tasks. Shifting emphasis from solely a person's ability to take a test to giving credit to those who are willing to engage in the journey and

¹ Kristen Cervantes, “Taking Action on Equity in Education” *District Management Journal* 30 (Winter 2022): 12–22, here 13.

² Heather Guffrey-Pacheco, “Intentional, Creative, Powerful: Technology and Design Thinking,” *Science and Children* (January/February 2022): 20–23, here 20.

³ Tetiana Hantsiuk, Khrystyna Vintoniv, Nataliia Opar, and Bohdan Hryvniak, “Developing Intercultural Competence through Design Thinking,” *European Integration Studies*, no. 15 (January 2021): 13–21, here 13.

process is uncomfortable for many students and professors. It requires the students to give of themselves without an immediate reward. It does not mean students do not receive feedback and guidance, just not always a numerical grade. I often tell my students, “If you engage in the learning process you will be happy with the product; failure to engage in the process will likely lead to a failing grade.”

A student’s learning journey allows them the opportunity to thrive, engage, learn, and espouse new knowledge at their own pace. Students should enter the virtual learning environment and feel they are part of a community of learners despite being physically distant. So, how do professors encourage students to engage the process rather than solely the product? I suggest a few ways to foster engagement in the learning journey:

1. Develop mindfulness practices
2. Implement rituals and routines
3. Encourage students to take ownership of the learning process
4. Decolonize curriculum materials

First, mindfulness practices offer a way for students to center and prepare themselves for learning. Centering prepares the mind for learning, allowing students to process new information. Students need minds free from distraction. So, creating positive energy as students join class promotes centering, helping students settle their minds. An example might be instead of hearing a beep as students enter the virtual class, they enter to the O’Jays singing “Love Train” or Ella Mai’s “Booed Up.” Students’ minds instantly shift: some sing, and some type comments in the chat. For others, it gives their minds time to make a mental shift before the professor begins to speak or give instruction. Research has shown mindfulness interventions such as intentional breathing and meditation to be forms of self-care that reduce stress and improve executive functioning.⁴

You cannot teach students whose minds are wandering and not centered, because distraction reduces executive functioning. Due to reduced executive functioning, students are unable to process new information, integrate it, and apply new concepts.⁵ Examples of virtual mindfulness practices are direct greetings to students, playing music as they log on, quick breathing exercises, or anything that allows the students to focus their energies. These examples vary based on the students’ needs. Greetings to students promote equity because acknowledging their presence says, “I see you and value your presence.” Intentional breathing offers the class a moment to pause, which says whatever happened before class is acknowledged, but be in *this* moment. It allows students to center their minds to be able to actively engage their brains to process new information.

These mindfulness practices of focusing on the learning process are highly effective if they are a part of group rituals and routines. Rituals and routines are an integral part of equity in the virtual classroom. Students need to know what to expect. This does not mean classes are boring and lack creativity. These routines allow students who log in late or deal with technology issues to easily enter the learning environment. Rituals and routine create a structure that allows students to thrive who may become easily lost in the literal distance of virtual learning.

I try to create an environment in which students take ownership of their learning journey. Students are in community with their peers and assist them in the journey. Often students come to class fixated on a grade without concern for a learning goal. Virtual learning communities can be interactive and provide spaces for students to engage while learning from a distance. Yet, this model of instruction does require a student to assume responsibility for their progress and learning journey. A part of this ownership is openness from the professor. Students need to feel

⁴ Miriam F. Krumholz, Cornelia Pinnell, and Daniel Sullivan, “Effectiveness of Brief Mindfulness Practice for Enhancing Graduate Students’ Attention,” *Psychology & Neuroscience* 15 (2022): 177–85.

⁵ Krumholz, Pinnell, and Sullivan, “Effectiveness of Brief Mindfulness Practice.”

that you are responsive to their concerns. The learning journey is traveled by both professor and student.

Finally, the crux of creating spaces that focus on the learning process is the decolonization of the curriculum materials. Whether you are teaching a core, major, or special topics course, students become more excited and motivated when they feel valued and believe they are represented in the readings. An example is how students in my World Religion class expected a lecture on race and religion to center on racism in America primarily through an African American lens. They were shocked when I shifted to a discussion of immigration laws and brown bodies after the 2016 election. Interestingly, I had a student of Mexican descent comment, "I was not ready. I just knew this was a black and white discussion. When you started talking about brown bodies at the borders, I was like, that is me. Yes! That is race and religion, too."

I envision a virtual or physical learning environment that decreases the opportunity gap by inviting students to a process-oriented instructional approach to learning rather than one that centers on a grade. A pedagogical approach focused on the process that develops mindfulness practices, implements rituals and routines, encourages students to take ownership of the learning process, and decolonizes the curriculum may be innovative while challenging to implement.

But! Here we are. Yes, in this moment of teaching both in-person and virtually. It may be challenging to teach to computer screens with square boxes of names or relying on PowerPoint and videos to engage with students rather than solely dialogue. But virtual classrooms are becoming permanent and a fixed characteristic of the university model. So, we must adjust to the classrooms we have been given. Whether you are in an office or at home with family in the other room, teaching to little boxes of names, you have a responsibility to provide learning experiences to your students that will cultivate them into critical, open-minded thinkers. Your students can thrive if you help them become more engaged learners by shifting the focus to the process of learning rather than the product. You can succeed in implementing mindfulness practices, creating rituals and routines, encouraging students to take ownership of their own learning, and choosing curriculum materials that value our students' differences.

Black Joy, Full Participation, and the University Classroom

Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds, Indiana University School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI

Transformative classrooms are marked by what theorists of equity, inclusion, and justice have called “full participation.”¹ “Full participation is an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others.”² Equity-based approaches recognize that full participation is often more accessible for certain groups than others. For example, it is often easier for a teacher or classroom leader rather than students to be fully present and comfortable in the classroom setting, especially in urban-serving research institutions with a large number of first-generation college students. In these types of institutions, there is considerable data showing that students who have parents or close relatives who have attended or graduated from university persist and succeed at higher rates. More broadly, students of color at universities are often less willing or able to participate or be fully present in university classrooms. Much of their exclusion can be attributed to pervasive anti-Black, white-supremacist spaces that make their full participation difficult if not impossible.

However, these anti-Black spaces are not simply marked by the exclusion of Black archives, experiences, and narrators, but often these spaces are a repetition of the carceral and exclusive spaces that have dominated the majority of Black students’ education experiences. From the K-12 classroom to the graduate seminar, several studies have concluded that Black participation is either devalued, ignored, or criminalized.³ The classroom is a space in which the persistent disciplining and surveilling of the Black body is affirmed as a necessary, albeit narrow, path for Black mobility and success. Therefore, while these spaces are often acknowledged as destructive and problematic in both their content and method, they are accepted as spaces in which Black bodies could and should persist. What might it mean to create classrooms that resist the carcerality of Black bodies and freedom? How might the goal of full participation mandate a comprehensive retooling of not only what we study but also how key components of the classroom must be radically altered for Black students to be present and full participants?

In response to the desire to create and imagine transformative learning spaces, a great amount of scholarship has identified the historical and contemporary need for fugitive spaces for Black students, scholars, and teachers. Fred Moten has theorized about the need for and creation of an “undercommons” or a fugitive space.⁴ Jarvis Givens, in his recently published *Fugitive Pedagogy*, highlights the historical role of subversive practices by Black teachers and in majority-Black learning environments.⁵ “Fugitive Pedagogy is rooted in the covert acquisition of knowledge by slaves and their descendants and has evolved into the practice of Black educators covertly teaching counter-hegemonic ideas through subversive practices.”⁶ Both of these scholars suggest

¹ Susan Strum et al., “Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Community Engagement in Higher Education,” *Full Participation* (September 2011), <https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=ia>, 24.

² Strum et al., “Full Participation.”

³ Pedro Noguera, *The Trouble with Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Na’ilah Suad Nasir et al., eds., “We Dare Say Love”: *Supporting Achievement in the Educational Life of Black Boys*, Multicultural Education Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019).

⁴ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: SEVEN THESES,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 101–15, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-101.

⁵ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 6.

⁶ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.

that, in order for Black bodies to be fully present or to participate in ways that are liberative, Black subjects must create alternative spaces or practice liberation in subversive, clandestine, or cloistered moments. In this piece, I would like to consider the requirement of fugitivity as a tax or cost that substantially disadvantages Black teachers and learners within the classroom.

There is the expectation that, in order for Black students to learn and fully participate, they must engage the dominant as well as subversive or fugitive curricula. While I agree that these spaces have been historically and are in the contemporary moment necessary for survival, I want to imagine religious studies classrooms or equity-informed pedagogical practices that place Black joy at the center rather than as a site reserved for students and teachers who have resources and spaces to create them.⁷ Fugitivity demands that marginalized students find joy and express themselves outside sanctioned spaces and without the support or resources necessary to fully sustain that joy. Furthermore, fugitivity suggests that Black agency is only necessary for Black bodies, rather than seeing Black agency and full participation as necessary for transforming the entire classroom experience.

The “politics of joy” as theorized by Lindsey Stewart includes a “shift toward self-determination and a shift away from the pursuit of white political recognition.”⁸ What does it mean to place Black joy and Black full participation at the center of the university classroom, specifically the religious studies classroom? How might the privileging of Black joy as a refusal of anti-Black practices of carcerality and surveillance open spaces for all students to fully participate and engage? Black joy and full participation begin by removing aspects of the university classroom that hold the notions of objectivity, canonicity, and method as sacred. The syllabus, the assignments, and even the format must make Black self-recognition and exploration possible, if not mandatory.

In the specific case of the religious studies classroom, the introductory study of American religion must begin with the study of Black religion and Black religious experience as a critical lens to think about the modern project of self-making and myth-making in the United States.⁹ Black experience, Black narrative, Black scriptural projects, and the stories of Black creativity must be used as the means by which we define, codify, and explore the category of American religion and its relationship to race and empire. This is in line with the critical intervention of Vincent Wimbush and his call to rethink the canon of biblical and scriptural studies.¹⁰ In centering Black joy in introductory and core courses, it is necessary to include a variety of Black voices who not only narrate and contextualize the history of white supremacy and oppression, but also think about Blackness as an agentive, creative, and rhetorical strategy that is compelling on its own terms.

How might we more fully include the depth and breadth of Black religious experience and its connection to the Black diaspora? We could begin with Ras Michael Brown’s work on Black religion, migration and belonging, move to the critical work by Josef Sorett on Black aesthetics and performances as virtuoso performances in their own right and not as resistance to or rejection of other forms, and then deploy Kayla Wheeler’s anthropological studies outlining Black beauty regimes and fashion on and in between Sabbath as a compelling way to engage Black joy and

⁷ Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 22.

⁸ Stewart, *Politics of Black Joy*.

⁹ See the important ways that American religion is defined and reimagined in Evans’ latest work on the Philadelphia-based MOVE movement. Richard Kent Evans, *MOVE: An American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Theorizing Scriptures: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon*, electronic resource, *Signifying (on) Scriptures* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

rethink the study of American religion.¹¹ “Black joy” centers on African origins, Black narratives of creativity and recreation, and the compelling ways that dispersed people have maintained, transformed, and engaged their varied cultural, religious, and political expressions.

Furthermore, I suggest that centering Black joy requires a constructive accounting of the ways in which the classroom has not been a site of exploration and expression for most students, especially students of color. How might we center practices and assignments that highlight the ways in which students are builders and creators of content and engagement rather than living in fear of assessment and disciplinary structures? This would require that the readings and practices that inform our shared learning space emerge from a variety of genres, including poetry, music, art, social media, and everyday practice, and that those genres would be seen and accepted as critical and engaged ways to assess the themes and questions of the course.

Joyful learning, therefore, is defined as learning that provides space for the variety of learners and engagement of ideas to be validated within the classroom. Joy-filled classrooms begin with identifying historical moments, texts, and questions that are central to our students, and building curricula, opportunities for engagement, and creative outcomes in response to those. Our traditional classrooms’ commitment to the reproduction of normative texts and ideas and a focus on point-based assessments have erased joy and experimentation from the university classroom and privileged particular learners, methods, and products. Equity-based pedagogy, in this regard, requires classrooms where joy, exploration, and the self, particularly the Black self, can be celebrated and engaged as the center of the classroom’s study and format, and not as something secondary or peripheral to it.

¹¹ Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*, Cambridge Studies on the American South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). See Kayla Wheeler’s forthcoming work titled *Fashioning Black Islam*.

Teaching for Communication, Collaboration, and Community-Building in Queer Theological Ethics

Yvonne C. Zimmerman, Methodist Theological School in Ohio

The white, Western, intellectualized academy taught me to value academic writing—research and analysis, specifically. Over the past thirteen-plus years of teaching, I have passed this value on to my students (or tried to). Until recently, imagining a seminary ethics course without a final research paper requirement seemed unthinkable, like something between a contradiction in terms and a dereliction of duty. Then, along came the Covid-19 pandemic, which required me to reshape a wide range of teaching practices and habits.

I taught Queer Theological Ethics online in fall 2020. Despite being in the thick of the pandemic, the course was a joy to teach. Students were engaged with the material, with me, and with one another. They were talkative in class, and we always had interesting discussions that absorbed my attention in all the best ways. They were inquisitive, asking good questions, and so open to learning from one another, from me, and the material we engaged. Watching the Netflix drama *Pose* had been one of my pandemic indulgences during the lockdown the previous spring, and so for the final project I asked students to watch this show and to treat it as a political and theo-ethical text. I clarified that they were not being graded on having watched the TV show but on their ability to reflect on it through the lens of queer theory and the methods explored in the course. With great loyalty to my training, the assignment I constructed asked them to write twelve- to fifteen-page analytic essays. By the end of October, however, it was clear that the level of stress students were under was so significant that they simply did not and would not have the capacity to write twelve to fifteen pages of well-organized, insightful analysis—not even about a show that all of them reported that they were really loving. This moment was an important turning point.

One of my perennial frustrations as an educator is that not all students will be good writers, and not all good students will be good writers. By “good students,” I mean students who are curious, interested, and open to learning, students who are doing the work and who absorb and reflect on course material—themes, content, processes. I mean students who are engaged and participating actively in the processes of learning. Not all of these students are going to be excellent writers. Likewise, by “good writer” I mean students who are skilled at using written words to communicate clearly and effectively. This is frustrating to me because in the way I learned under the tutelage of the white, Western, intellectualized academy to conceptualize and create assignments, and then to assess student learning in those assignments, the highest grades always flow to those students who are good writers, even if they are not “good” students as I’ve just described. Some good students get B’s and C’s because their writing skills are underdeveloped. Some mediocre students get A’s because they happen to know how to write well. It is not that I structure my assignments for this result *intentionally*; rather, this is the pattern that habitually assigning research papers and analytic essays reproduces. Although I was aware of and bothered by the persistence and predictability of this pattern, I also could not wrap my mind around another tool (or set) that I thought would be as effective or as important as a writing assignment. I was stuck because I could not imagine what else I could ask students to do. Of course, this is exactly how hegemonic frameworks and mindsets work: they make alternatives unthinkable.

I have heard the Covid-19 pandemic described as apocalyptic in the sense that *apocalypse* means “revelation” or “showing.” This characterization resonates with me, as living through the pandemic these past two-plus years has had a distinctly revelatory dimension, showing so much for what it truly was; for what it truly *is*. If I was already aware that performances of white, Western intellectual rigor are empty and even exploitative exercises that

do not always adequately reflect student learning, the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020 demanded that I make actual, concrete changes to my teaching that reflect that awareness—and immediately.

Instead of doubling down on writing, I decided to maximize the value of the medium that was already working so well in the course: Zoom. Approximately one month before the end of the semester, I revised the final project assignment. I divided the students into groups of three to four and asked each group to record a forty-five-minute- to one-hour-long Zoom conversation in which they would discuss the show in relation to course material. Specifically, I directed them to discuss the intersections between particular books or authors from the course and the show (whether as a whole, particular scenes/sequences, or characters). “What you’re being graded on,” my revised assignment description explained, “is your ability to relate what you’ve read for class and our discussions in class to the show—to put it into constructive and illuminative conversation with the show’s plotlines, characters and themes.”

The results of this assignment surpassed my expectations. The recorded Zoom discussions were incredibly rich and interesting for me to watch. Surprisingly, I found that I had a lot of feedback to give each of the groups—something that is *never* the case for me at the end of the semester, when I am almost always already exhausted from reading and providing feedback on students’ writing in shorter papers from throughout the semester. Listening to the recorded Zoom conversations was a different experience. It was not a burden, and it genuinely spurred and contributed to my thinking. Moreover, in terms of how students participated and contributed insights and ideas, it was evident that the assignment allowed a wider range of students to demonstrate their learning and thinking effectively than the analytic writing assignments on which I’ve traditionally relied. Student feedback on the course confirmed that this assignment met the needs of the moment. “Thank you,” one student wrote, “for recognizing the need to think outside of the box in regards to finals and ways we can show what we know.”

The teaching innovation I’ve described is the outcome of the kind of impasse that many of us found ourselves confronted with in one way or another during the pandemic. Whether in our personal lives, professional lives, or both, the demand was nonnegotiable: something needs to change *right now*. For me, this crisis contained the opportunity to get unstuck from the hegemonic framework into which I was habituated. I began to recognize that when I say that I value strong writing skills, what I really mean is that I value effective communication; and writing is not communication itself, but a *mode* of communication. Moreover, in addition, to effective communication, I also want my courses to hone students’ skills of professional collaboration and community building, because religious leaders and other professionals need to be able to hold discussions with all the voices in the room, engaging the contributions that everyone can make to a shared discussion—not just the loudest or most articulate voices. Independent paper-writing, even on the most interesting and innovative topics, simply does not foster this skill set.

One of the marks of equity-focused pedagogy is reducing the predictability of who succeeds and who fails. For me, moving toward equity-focused pedagogy means decentering the emphasis I place on academic writing in evaluating student learning. Don’t get me wrong: I will probably always value effective writing, but it’s becoming a relative rather than an absolute scholarly value for me. I am leaning into the recognition that academic writing steeped in research and analysis is not necessarily the most important skill that seminary students need and may not be essential to include as a component of every course. Other kinds of assignments, such as recorded Zoom conversations, provide opportunities for students to develop and rehearse skills of collaboration, community building, and communication. Conversation is a format in which students are able to elicit from each other their best inputs, helping each other to contribute and clarify their own thinking and insights. In this way, using conversations to showcase student learning not only helps *students* “hear each other into speech”; it also helps *me* break the hegemonic stalemate

I was stuck in with traditional writing assignments and to bring into visibility a greater range of contributions.

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