

Personal Statement for the American Academy of Religion Teaching Award

Kwok Pui-lan

A student named John made an appointment to see me, when I taught the Introduction to Theology course at the Episcopal Divinity School almost a decade ago. He said, “Pui Lan, I’ve had a hard time finishing the final research paper. I was a ballet dancer before coming to seminary, and I seldom have to write.” How would you have responded to John? I had two options: I could either dismiss his claim as an excuse not to finish his work, or explore with him how he might learn theology in a way he would feel more comfortable and less intimidating. I decided to choose the latter, and the result has revolutionized my teaching ever since.

In our institutions of higher learning, where linguistic skills are the critical means for measuring academic success and competence, students like John are at a disadvantage and are often made to feel that they are less intelligent. How can a teacher make room for students like John, who have other forms of intelligence, as Harvard’s Howard Gardner has long argued? In the disciplines of theology and religion, why should we limit the knowledge about God or the sacred to reading and interpreting texts alone? In my school, where the average age of the students is 43, how can we truly honor the diverse experiences that adult learners bring? What do I need to do in order to increase my repertoire of pedagogies so that I can be a teacher for all my students, and not just for the linguistically gifted? How can I prepare myself to teach in the increasingly multiracial and multicultural classroom? These questions are at the center of my analytical reflection on the nature and process of my teaching in the United States for the last thirteen years.

How Do We Learn What We Learn?

Since I have taught both in Asia and in the United States, I am keenly aware of the divergent assumptions about teaching and pedagogical styles. The banking model is unfortunately still widely practiced in Asia, where the teacher is respected as the authority and as the one who is responsible to impart knowledge. As we all know, many educators have criticized this “teacher-centered” approach, especially since the publication of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In its place, the “student-centered” model, which respects the knowledge of the students and the questions they bring to class, has been proposed as a remedy.

The “student-centered” model has the advantages of making the classroom more egalitarian, welcoming, and congenial to more active student participation. Instead of the teacher telling the students what they are supposed to learn, the students have to find it out themselves through posing questions and problem solving. The “student-centered” approach also seems to fit the educational philosophy of some feminist teachers, at a time when they are challenging male hierarchical relations in the academy.

But I have found that the “student-centered” model is not without problems in my experience. First, many of the students who arrive at divinity schools these days do not have a strong background in liberal arts, and need the teacher to provide the history and context of what they are reading. Second, I have seen that the “student-centered” approach can turn into a few vocal students talking endlessly about their personal experiences, without truly engaging the subject they are studying. Third, the “student-

centered” model may mystify the power dynamics operating in the classroom: on the surface it may look like egalitarian and participatory, but the teacher is still the one holding power and grading the students. Fourth, as a minority female teacher, who is not respected as much as her white colleagues, the “student-centered” model may provide excuses for students to undercut my role as their teacher.

I have found that Parker Palmer’s model of “subject-centered” (*The Courage to Teach*) more helpful, as the teacher and students are regarded as co-investigators of the subject under study. There is a division of labor, as each can contribute his or her knowledge and perspective to the subject, based on his or her background. For example, in my course on God and Creation, I helped students understand the theological texts they were reading. I asked an African student to analyze the devastating effects of deforestation and the green revolution in Africa, and a tribal woman from India to share stories about creation in her tradition. Students were also divided into small groups to discuss particular issues and reported back. In this way, learning occurs not as a one-way traffic between the teacher and the students, but as multiple lines of communications between students and students in various forms.

The Use of Art and Multimedia in Teaching

John’s case is a clear example that students have multiple intelligences, as Howard Gardner has pointed out. But many colleagues teaching theology and religion think that Gardner’s theory is more applicable to kindergartens than to graduate schools. While I still required John to learn to write his academic paper with my help, I have been more conscious in including other media, such as art, music, ritual, meditation, and movement in my pedagogy. Yes, I even included dancing in one of my classes. Some time ago, I saw this memorable saying, attributed to the Chinese, at the Museum of Science in Boston:

Tell me, and I will forget,
Show me, and I will learn,
Involve me, and I will understand.

In the beginning, I used these various media in my courses on spirituality, because the subject matter is more congenial to diverse approaches of learning. I start each class with meditation accompanied with music, and then ask a student to select a poem to begin the class. The students also take turns to create a centerpiece as a focal point for reflection and to plan a short closing ritual for each class. I have also used the resources in the community to teach the course on spirituality of healing, such as inviting people to demonstrate Tai Chi, acupuncture, and Reiki, as well as bringing students to visit the Chinese herbal shop in Chinatown. I have found out that as these activities increase the students’ sense of ownership, they are more prompted to contribute to the overall learning experience, which I have called the “ecology” of learning.

Because of the success of the spirituality courses, I was emboldened to use more audio-visuals in teaching courses in theology, which normally involve reading and interpreting theological texts. For example, in the course on God and Creation, I began each class with music from different periods under study: Jewish psalms, early Christian music, Gregorian chants, Hildegard’s hymns, Romantic music, and the contemporary Missa Gaia. I projected pictures of NASA’s Mars Exploration from its website during the first class, and later showed Chinese landscape paintings and a picture illustrating the

centrality of the Corn Mother in the Mayan creation story. I also used the electronic Smartgroup device so that students can email to each other their questions and reflections before and after class. The device also enabled students to share information about the immense resources on the web concerning the topic. When we evaluated the course at the end, many said that the diverse modalities of learning helped to sustain their interests and allowed them to participate in many ways possible.

Needless to say, I have not been taught this way in graduate school! This means I have to radically expand my teaching repertoire as I mature as a teacher. My learning of Tai Chi, yoga, and piano certainly help, and so do the religious pilgrimages and retreats I have taken. I was also privileged to take part in a Wabash Mid-career Faculty Workshop, during which I exchanged ideas about teaching with seasoned and dedicated colleagues. I applied for a fellowship to go to Italy to understand more about Western Christian art and its importance in theology and spirituality. The more I broaden my life experiences and draw from an emotional depth that I do not think I have, the better I can reach out and touch my students.

Teaching as if Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality Matter

John is not only a former ballet dancer; he is also a white gay man. I imagine how many classes he must have set through before coming to our school, in which the subject of being gay was never broached. I also remember the days when I was a graduate student, when the issues of race, gender, and class remained completely invisible, deemed insignificant for what we were learning. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes the uphill battle of challenging the hegemony of white middle-class heterosexual norms and values that shape the curriculum and culture of the classroom. Hooks was made to feel inferior when she was transplanted from her black neighborhood to Stanford.

I was one of the two minority teachers in a faculty of about 20 when I began teaching at the Episcopal Divinity School. It was extremely difficult to raise issues about race, gender, and class in a predominantly white school, when most of the people of color were working in buildings and grounds and in the kitchen. Anti-racism work in the classroom was not supported by the ethos of the school or the religious denomination the school belongs to. With the help of a change team and a consultant agency, the school has embarked on challenging racism and embracing multicultural education to an extent rarely seen in seminaries. Today, nearly half of our faculty are teachers of color. In the past decade, we have changed the school's mission statement and completed an audit on our curriculum structure, which now requires all students to have antiracism training and to take courses outside the Euro-American context. The faculties take turns in undergoing training in antiracism and multiculturalism, and each course's evaluation includes how the course fulfills the school's mission of embodying diversity and respecting differences.

When the struggle against racism becomes a shared value of the school, it allows room for addressing differences between the racial and ethnic groups. As a teacher of Asian descent, I have sometimes been caught in racial conflicts between white and black colleagues and students, as well as between students with various hues of color. The experience requires me to reflect on the particular location of an Asian faculty in American institutions of higher learning. Although the study body has diversified to a great extent in the past decades, questions about race are still largely framed in terms of

black and white, to the exclusion of the Hispanics/Latinos, Asian and Native Americans, and people of mixed heritages.

As one of the few Asian women teaching theology, I became aware that my holistic pedagogy is not just to honor the diverse needs of my students, but also to resist a Western bias on the study of religion, which tends to focus on texts. In Asian traditions, religion is not a separate domain, defined by systems of beliefs and maxims hashed out in texts. Religion is more a way of life, embodied by music, art, food, festival, and spiritual practices. In fact, this was also the case for Christianity before modernization and secularization restricted it largely to the private realm. My holistic approach enables students to recover their wonder and curiosity about God, and allows me to create a learning atmosphere that honors my heritage.

Being mindful of my own cultural background also makes me aware that we all carry our cultural assumptions into the classroom, which have important bearings on how we look at the authority of the teacher, judge the demeanor of students, or handle conflicts in sensible ways. I remember when a heated exchange occurred between a white and a black student in my class several years ago, I was eager to change the subject because I could sense that a potential conflict was looming on the horizon. When I later reflected on the incident, I had to admit that my Asian cultural orientation, which values harmony over disagreement, has prevented me from helping the students to see that conflicts can be resolved constructively and need not be avoided at all cost.

It is important to recognize that a racial minority teacher has to learn how to handle a diverse classroom, as much as other teachers have to. Having a minority status may provide one with a unique perspective to examine power dynamics in the classroom, but does not guarantee success in handling racially charged conflictual situations. I have to consult books and attend workshops on multicultural teaching to better prepare myself to name my own fears and to be more comfortable in handling conflicts of different kinds. Helping students to be cognizant of their own cultural assumptions, in turn, also promotes cultural sensitivity and understanding.

Learning to Teach in Community

When I was in graduate school in the 1980s, little attention was paid to preparing Ph.D students for teaching or mentoring students. It was assumed that the students were either born to be teachers or they could easily learn to teach once on the job. My learning curve was steep in the beginning, as I had few role models to follow. Now, as one of the senior Asian women faculty teaching theology (in professor rank), I have initiated a number of projects to help younger faculty so that they can learn from our successes and failures. With other Asian and Asian American women faculty, I initiated a research project, and was the chief editor for its report on “Developing Teaching Materials and Instructional Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women’s Theologies in North America” (1999). The report was distributed to some 150-member schools of the Association of Theological Education, and remained the only resource on this subject in the field. Since 1997, I have been involved in a doctoral seminar for mentoring Asian and Asian American female doctoral students in theology and religion.

At the Wabash Mid-career Faculty Workshop (2002-2003), we shared critical incidents in our teaching. We learned so much from these concrete cases, as we discussed them through role play, fish bowl method, and small groups, and imagined how these

critical incidents might have been handled differently. We are bold enough to publish these incidents for the benefit of other teachers, because as tenured faculty we are able to take more risks. I was responsible for soliciting and editing these critical incidents for an upcoming issue focusing on mid-career faculty in the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion*.

As the current chair of the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession of AAR, I am planning a career guide for racial and ethnic minority scholars. There will be a substantial section on teaching, because few racial minorities teach in research institutions, and most of our work consists primarily of teaching undergraduates and master students. I anticipate that the career guide will be helpful not only for racial minority teachers, but also for white colleagues and institutions interested in supporting and retaining minority colleagues.

Teaching, for me, is an art, and requires much dedication and hard work. Many years later, when I saw John again, I told him how his conversation with me has changed my teaching. It was truly rewarding when he thanked me: “Pui Lan, I am grateful that you have listened and you’ve taken me seriously.”