

In the evaluations of my spring “Introduction to Religious Thought” course, one student commented: “When I began this class, I was excited because I love learning about religion, [but] I was shocked when Dr. Medine began talking about how E. B. Tylor believes that everything has a soul, and then...about the Green Man, which I thought was ridiculous.” The student continues, “I can admit now that, though I thought I was coming...with a very open mind, my thoughts were actually very narrow-minded.” She writes that she began to listen differently, learning that she should not “look at religion, or anything else in life, through a one-sided glass.”¹

Lucille Clifton says that young people need mirrors, to see the world reflect them, but also windows, through which to see the other.² When I teach, I try to open windows—and to get students either to climb out or to invite the stranger in, if only momentarily. This student concluded, “It is always good to look at all view points and to understand how they relate to mine—or just to respect them.”

I teach to generate this openness: at least, change, and, at best, transformation, a term with which I wrestle. I neither want to transform the students into “mini-me” nor do I want them to adopt world-views that they cannot sustain outside the boundaries of the classroom. What I want for them, and for me, is that we all become respectful neighbors and, perhaps, choose to become friends, and that we experience the pleasures in knowing and of doing something with knowledge. This involves four elements.

First, I want students to be present, knowledgeably, in the world, because globalization makes us neighbors in unexpected ways. This means that they should know information about religion, and where to go to get good information, but also to see knowledge as useful: to believe before they doubt,³ to “try on” another’s experience. One student, for example, told me that she attended a Jewish wedding with her Jewish boyfriend, and **she**, she said proudly, explained the symbolism to **him**. She had studied Judaism but, now, it was alive. She tried it on—and helped her boyfriend to experience his tradition anew.

Second, I want students to become aware of the portability of knowledge. For example, when I teach Religion 1003, we work with rite of passage theory. We read a canonical text, like the story of Moses, and study the Hadj, watching a film, and the students draw and annotate a model of the protagonist’s movements through the rite of passage. Many students, later, tell me that they carry and deploy this theory—and others—in other classes or in settings with friends, in which they see into popular culture or understand something about their own lives. The theory is the handle that lets them open the window. They are absolutely delighted as they tell these stories, for they learn something, not for a test, but for intellectual life.

Third, I insist on community. I ban electronic devices, because students will use them right up to the moment class starts (and some after). I ask them to make an act of attention: to the work, to each other (their neighbors who may become friends. When I walk into a class and find students so busy talking to each other that I cannot get their attention, I am happy), and to me. We are a learning *community*. I also tell them that

there are other students, all over the world, reading the same works they are: their knowledge is a connection to the world that is just as important as technology.

Finally, I want students to learn how they learn. I am transparent about how I construct the learning experience so that students have tools to and can be free to open safely that window. They may either crawl out, invite in the “other,” or just to talk across the border. I want students to understand, not just **what** we are doing, but **why** and **how**. Therefore, we engage in what Patricia Killen calls “parallel processing.” Assignments and tests are one way to assess whether students are making intellectual moves, of course, but I think they come too late for many students. More important to me is to stop, to ask, at key moments, “What have we been doing? Why do you think we did it this way? What did you learn from this process, and how did you learn it?” Helping students reflect on my teaching and their learning keeps me fresh because I learn how they learn and grow in my capacity to teach them.

The advice I would give a new teacher is: Be conscious of and reflective about course construction and be transparent with your students about structure, scaffolding (the steps a student should make to learn), and the outcome(s) you have defined. My best moments are when students become so conscious of the construction of intellectual experience⁴ that they take it over, and I watch them teach and learn in community. This also means that I must have the humility to accept their agency, their reconstructions of my frames and scaffolds.

After twenty years, I test less, and we write more. I use workshops structure, to build skills and complex knowledge, and lecture less. I teach information but build towards comparison and extension,⁵ as we discuss the common texts together.⁶

Whether I am teaching undergraduates, working with young teachers at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, or constructing discussion group sessions with my graduate teaching assistants, I want those I teach to try on ideas, to take on the intellectual quest, and to return home refreshed. As one student put it:

This is the first college class I've taken (I'm a sophomore) in which the professor cares about me learning material and using things I've never seen before rather than just memorizing and grades.

That's success.

Notes

¹ Teaching evaluations are anonymous, so I do not know names.

² Hilary Holladay, "She Could Tell You Stories: A Conversation about Names, Race, and the Need for Mirrors: Lucille Clifton Interviewed by Hilary Holladay," www.poetryfoundation.org/article/179624. Accessed September 21, 2012. Clifton says, "I have a little talk that I give sometimes about windows and mirrors, that children—and humans, everybody—all need both windows and mirrors in their lives: mirrors though which you can see yourself and windows through which you can see the world."

³ Peter Elbow, "The Believing Game and How to Make Conflicting Opinions More Fruitful," in *Nurturing the Peacemakers in Our Students: A Guide to Teaching Peace, Empathy, and Understanding*, edited by Chris Weber (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006).

⁴ See Donald L. Finkel, *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc. 2000), 96, 156. Since we teach in such different contexts, Finkel's book posed a challenge to me. In my work with the Wabash Center, implemented in my classroom, I have become better at creating the "open-ended seminar" (39) and in letting the books and the students do the deep work, rather than being "in charge" all the time. My classes, particularly discussion sections/sessions, often follow a workshop model.

⁵ Sue Fostaty Young and Robert J. Wilson, *Assessment and Learning: The ICE Approach* (Winnipeg Manitoba, Canada: Portage and Main Press, 2000). This has been a constant in my description to my students—and for my thought—about what we are doing in class. ICE stands for Ideas, Connections, and Extensions. I tell students that we are working on these three levels. One will recognize, here, a simplification of Bloom's Taxonomy.

⁶ Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006. 115-152. Discussion. Unlike Brookfield, I **do** think that discussions can (and maybe should) be guided (see 128-131)—or, more accurately, framed or structured, such that students know where they can enter. Some may enter at a point of information and/or clarification, others in comparison and contrast, and others to extend the discussion. Some may listen attentively. All are valuable.