

Pandemic pedagogy: improvising our practices of teaching

BY EILEEN CAMPBELL-REED

How do we carry on teaching and learning in our seminary classes caught up in a crisis with no clear end in sight? Pandemic pedagogy invites us to wait patiently, proceed relationally, and seek collaboration.

As I packed on Sunday afternoon, March 8, I felt uncharacteristically anxious. My flight the next morning from Nashville to New York City was for a week of meetings and class at Union Theological Seminary. Outbreaks of the new Coronavirus filled the news and social media. I debated about canceling my flight even as I zipped up my roller bag.

Late that evening my dean, Pamela Cooper-White, called me. “Did you see the email from Dr. Jones? We are calling off class Monday and Tuesday to prepare for teaching remotely.”

And thus began a new world of pandemic pedagogy.

In these seven weeks, the whole world has turned upside down. In the US alone, we are approaching one million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 53,000 deaths. Unemployment is soaring. Stock markets are tumbling. The healthcare system is stressed. Businesses are shuttered, and millions of people are sheltered at home, while essential workers keep the bare minimum services going. Churches have moved worship online. Funerals, weddings, and graduations are delayed. Feelings of grief, outrage, depression, and loss are



widespread. Teachers and students from preschool to graduate school are carrying on remotely.

How does one teach and learn in seminary classes in this pandemic world?

Late last fall, I interviewed a half dozen colleagues in theological education for Three Minute Ministry Mentor. Although we had no inkling that a pandemic was coming, I asked each professor to reflect on how their practices of teaching have changed over time.

Eric Barreto, Danielle Tumminio Hansen, and Mary Clark Moschella told me about key shifts that have marked their years of teaching. Their stories offer us guiding lights as we all improvise our pedagogies daily.

At this moment, schools are asking: How long will the crisis last? What will the fall bring? Whatever our decisions, here are three ways to improvise our pedagogical imaginations, as we adapt our teaching to meet the crisis.



Wait patiently and resist fixing

“One challenge across theological education is that many students come to seminary having learned the Bible differently than I did growing up.

Some students have less experience at reading, memorizing, or even knowing biblical texts.”

This lament was articulated by **Eric Barreto**, Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary.

His first impulse was to push for change: “For a while, I lamented that and even tried to fix” the students’ lack of preparation. However, Barreto eventually shifted his thinking and began to ask, “What if we see these students and their learning of Scripture as a gift? Folks are reading the text for the first time. What would I give to read the gospel of Luke, as if I had never read it before, with fresh eyes?!”

Shifting our responses from lamenting or fixing what students lack to waiting patiently for that unique moment when they make a discovery expands our pedagogical imaginations. With Barreto, we can begin to “treasure that new perspective,” that students bring to our classrooms.

This approach captures what educational psychologist Robert Boice commends in his acclaimed book *Advice for New Faculty Members*. Boice’s first rule for teaching and preparation is “wait”—not passively, but actively. “Active waiting means holding back, reflectively, instead of rushing.”

“I worry a little less about students learning all the stuff they will need to know. Even if they had three years of Bible courses, it still wouldn’t be enough time to teach everything I wish pastors could know,” said Barreto, after a decade of teaching.

This decreased sense of worry resonates with Boice’s guidance about patient waiting: “Because active waiting is almost always experimental and explorative, it helps us

moderate the perfectionism of supposing that we should make no mistakes, that we must know everything, that we are to be in constant control as teachers.”

What has Barreto learned to do instead?

“What we can do is teach practices, teach a sensibility, a posture toward Scripture. And we can shift away from knowing a bunch of stuff to knowing *who* you are and knowing *how* you read.”

As we continue crafting our pandemic pedagogies, we can resist the urge to rush into the situation. Much of what we face in pandemic times is not fixable in any clear way. It is certainly lamentable yet, if we become frozen there, we miss creative opportunities to teach and learn. When we wait creatively and generatively, we can show our students—as Barreto does—how to know more about themselves and embrace the skills of ministry like reading, preaching, and caring.



Focus on how relationships matter

Danielle Tumminio Hansen, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of Field Education at Seminary of the Southwest, received the following advice when she was an

MDiv student at Yale University Divinity School: “Seminary is a special time. And you may never again have a cohort of people who are with you.”

She said the counsel was meaningful, and yet, “it was not until I was out in the field that I could understand. Oftentimes in a church parish or in a seminary department, it is *just you*.”

Now, after years of ministry and seminary teaching, Hansen said, “I value my relationships with my colleagues. I really make time to cultivate them . . . more and more with time.”

Relationships matter for teachers to find support from colleagues. Relationships also matter for learners. Although we do not need to have personal relationships

outside of class with every student, we do have a relational obligation to all our students.

“As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence,” wrote author bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*.

To convey to our students how to enter the professional and spiritual practice of ministry as caring leaders, our pedagogical work is to model a relational care toward all students.

In the first weeks of the crisis, I asked each student in my classes—many of whom had to relocate—to email me privately and tell me about the pandemic’s impact on their lives and work situations; Internet and computer capacities; abilities to focus and learn; and new time zones. Each student responded with gratitude. I believe it has made a difference in how these seven weeks have unfolded with my students.



Let others share the work

Mary Clark Moschella, Roger J. Squire Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at Yale University Divinity School, said her approach to teaching has changed over two decades in seminary classrooms and inside

a prison. “I’ve gradually relaxed into teaching, and I’ve tried to model being present with the class and whatever comes up.”

In her classes, Moschella said her teaching is rooted in her experience as a pastor. She consistently leads

students to take on difficult topics like sexism and racism, death and grief, poverty and addiction. Strong feelings come up, and she invites her students to “really be there and work on it . . . and to have conversations that are caring across differences.”

Moschella also teaches an *“Inside/Out Class”* at a federal prison. In that context—where incarcerated student are “insiders” and divinity students are “outsiders”—some powerful learning happens.

“Students learn from one another more than I could teach them alone,” said Moschella. “I’m learning to facilitate that.”

Boice’s seventh rule for faculty who want more ease and greater skill when it comes to teaching is: “Let others do some of the work.” This rule requires “letting go of the control and credit.”

Moschella invites her students and teaching affiliates to bring their wisdom and knowledge into the classroom setting. She is more interested in being present than being right.

This spring, I had to drop a face-to-face expert panel for my *Death Dying, and Bereavement* course at Union. I let others share the work by interviewing students, pastoral theologians, and ministers on Zoom. Their wisdom made the class much richer.

To be sure, we need to make many adjustments in our pandemic pedagogies. Finding ways to wait patiently, proceed relationally, and seek collaboration are the keys to doing it well.



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