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The institutions where I have served as a member of the faculty have greatly influenced, shaped, and directed the development of my pedagogical trajectory. To me, the expressed mission—“putting knowledge to work,” “educating men and women of diverse backgrounds for ministry,” “educating individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community,” and “to encourage individuals in their spiritual and intellectual growth, to prepare leaders who will be agents of social justice, and to educate future scholars and teachers of religion” — were not mere taglines to handbooks, websites, or recruitment spiels given to prospective students during their visits to my office or classes. Rather, I employed, and continue to employ, these missions as teaching touchstones that articulate my understanding of the fundamental, vocational objectives of teaching religious studies and theological education.

However much my trajectory as a teacher has been influenced by the aforementioned missions,

I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to the fount and source of some of the most formative and significant influences on my worldview. I must acknowledge in clear and certain terms that my teaching philosophy has been inspired by the moral wisdom imparted to me through the familial lessons of my youth — through the wisdom my sharecropping grandparents and military parents deemed necessary for me both to survive and to thrive as an African-American girl growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas. In particular, I would highlight my mother's and grandmother's narratives, colorful and instructive doses of wisdom and struggle that for me were the quintessence of what it means to be critically self-reflective: "Practice what you preach." "Remember that it's a long line that has no end." "Learn how to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." My father's words of wisdom were coupled with his military perspective (and insistence) that gave the imperative and urgency to his words that "the biggest room was the room for improvement." These occasions of moral instruction were contexts that cultivated confidence to pose questions and openness to reason with them about opinions or concerns of mine that differed from their strict discipline. They used every occasion to lovingly nurture an abiding desire in me to be both vigilant in my quest of knowledge and intrigued (as opposed to intimidated) by the challenges it presented, even if those challenges were manifested in powers, principalities, or people. At a rudimentary level, these maxims have shaped my approach and philosophy to the teaching profession.

On the first day of all my classes, I introduce the study of ethics by stating: "Ethics begins where problems start. Our work together as ethical leaders will be to become the change we seek by naming, facing, and striving to resolve problems." In this respect, my students learn at the outset that ethics is no mere intellectual exercise; it is a social imperative that impacts their lives and those of others. That is, ethics is measured by real, tangible outcomes. However, facilitating real outcomes in an era of increased multiculturalism and rapid global transformation is no easy task. This is most especially the case because race, gender, and money are frightening and distressing topics to most students. This, coupled with the fact that they have to confront my subject matter (which interrogates racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia) under the tutelage of a Black female authority, an experience they have rarely, if ever encountered, is initially more than some of them can bear. As a result, many at first are stunted in their ability to do the rigorous and reflective work needed to engage the subject and, in turn, for the subject to change them. This is the glass or brick wall that most faculty of color (particularly women) find themselves crashing against when they enter a new teaching environment that has yet to live up to the promise of diversity.

Discovering the power and necessity of embodied pedagogy is the outcome of a teaching career in which I have continued to be challenged by ideas and practices that transform the teaching-learning process. In my own quest for knowledge and classroom competency, I have also learned that, as a relatively young Black woman, I must negotiate the contested space of the classroom because my very presence causes dissonance in what is considered a Eurocentric, middle-aged space. My ability to overcome the teaching challenges encountered in such a context has been aided by those who have designed, implemented, and experienced the

power of transformative pedagogy in their own regard. Writings such as Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*, Carter G. Woodson's *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Katie Cannon's *Teaching Preaching*, Charles Foster's *Educating Clergy*, and the anthology *Being Black, Teaching Black* have become scripture in my sacred practice of teaching. In fact, their research and testimony have caused me to publish and share my own insights about teaching that transforms.

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My pedagogy has always sought unapologetically to create conflict in the minds, lives, and souls of the students who enroll in my interdisciplinary courses in Ethics, Black Church Studies, and Feminist/Womanist Studies. These challenging and integrated scholarly approaches coupled with my very embodiment as a Black woman creates both cognitive dissonance and even cultural shock for most of my students. Instead of shying away from this reality, I use this conflict and dissonance in my teaching by chipping away at the external façade of many of my students' identities as well as their expectations of the teaching-learning process. I have found the pedagogical creation of uneasiness and tension with the *status quo* to be a vital component for the resolution of ethical conflict, and, ultimately, the realization of social justice. That is, to create conflict is to invite and bring about change, and it is only through change that unjust conditions can be transformed to positive life options.

As an illustration: by using case studies "ripped from the headlines" in many of my ethics courses, I seek to situate my students in media res by immersing them in the heart of a given subject, rather than allowing them the safe distance usually afforded by supposed objectivity and abstraction. Such "objectivity" compels them to invest in the lowest forms of moral thinking, wherein descriptive ethics is used in an effort to construct a normative theory of human nature that, for instance, judges people based on the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Instead, my disciplinary objective is to have them develop, exercise, and utilize the highest form of moral reasoning, wherein metaethics bears witness to answering questions with logic and epistemological insight so as to be less occupied with right and wrong and more preoccupied with the just and good for all.ⁱⁱ

Living in an era of increased multiculturalism, economic anxiety, and religious pluralism, I

believe that, as teachers, we who engage in the fight for social justice must ask ourselves a fundamental, existential ethical question: “How does my teaching realize social justice for those people who see justice as an impossible reality in their lives?” This social justice sensibility in my teaching-learning process involves inviting my students into a “living laboratory” classroom context wherein we collectively seek to transform the world in which we live by examining and understanding the ways people believe, feel, know, and understand the sacred in their lives. Thus, my pedagogical challenges and their measures of success have always involved identifying, procuring, and often creating from scratch the resources and tools (e.g., curricula, syllabi, models, technological support, training, funding, etc.) needed to transform my classroom into this living laboratory — that is, into a space in which students can gain experience confronting and resolving real world issues so as to prepare them to face similar challenges in the real world outside of the classroom with clarity of thought and confidence of character.

My pedagogical philosophy stems from eight tenets: 1) The personal is, indeed, political; 2) Learning and teaching raise the most essential questions about human existence; 3) Teachers must generate strategies that demand both critical reflection and accountability — be it personal, social, or institutional; 4) The learning process is one in which the theoretical lends itself to the practical; 5) The teaching moment must grapple with issues such as freedom of choice, conscious action, personal character, and considerations of moral responsibility; 6) The link between the theory and practice of human relationships becomes much more evident when the teaching moment strives to understand why people do what they do in order to figure out what ought to be done; 7) My beliefs about teaching stem from the core of what I do and who I am; and most importantly, 8) The teacher’s main goal should be to meet students where they are, in order to take them where they need to go.

From the core of these eight tenets, I strive to create a teaching-learning context that is at once academically rigorous, socially relevant, and character-building. I approach the vocation of teaching with the goal of exposing students to worlds of ideas and beliefs, discursive realms they can enter freely and engage fearlessly, in order to cultivate sound character as well as to enlarge their capacity for critical thought, sound scholarship, ministerial leadership, and good citizenship. One of my primary goals is to elicit from students an active, intellectual investment in all aspects of the pedagogical process (e.g., assigned readings and evaluative exercises) throughout the term of each course. In so doing, I aim to introduce them to definitive inquiries, methods, and conceptual frameworks, thus equipping them not only with disciplinary information, but also with disciplinary competency. I encourage students to view the field of theological education in immediate relationship to religious studies, as well as in cognate relationship with other disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences. I cannot guarantee that they all will ascribe to this philosophy of liberal arts education. Nevertheless, I work hard to establish an environment where students develop the intellectual courage and imagination to identify places of coherence and cross-fertilization across their core curriculum.

At the time I won the teaching award, many of my students were second-career professionals whose employment experiences ranged from working in the widely ranging fields of banking, medicine, social work, education, childcare, government, and engineering. At the research-based university divinity school where I am now employed, I teach not only Master's level students in theological studies but also graduate students in the department of religion. In this context, I find myself reaching and shaping a younger demographic of students who are more geared towards social justice — students who are generally theologically literate, but who often lack experiential understanding of the implications of their ministerial and social ambitions. In either context, however, my pedagogical imperatives are always designed to help students draw effectively from their individual expertise and experience. Experience has taught me how, in educational contexts where students often tend to feel anonymous and virtually discounted, emphasizing that each person in the classroom — teacher and student alike — can and will achieve their highest aspirations is the most prized aspect of the learning process to me. By utilizing the level of personal investment and the willingness to encounter the discomfiting, for myself and my students alike, I strive to foster a “pedagogy of possibility” that presents learning and teaching as synergistic enterprises that are neither isolated nor disposable, but rather, are all-encompassing elements of life that extend well beyond and long after our shared classroom experience. In so doing, my expressed hope is that I and my students invest in the rigorous work of learning and knowledge production so we all will leave our campuses and venture out into the “real world” as dynamic, thoughtful people ready, willing, and able to face the challenges of life with a sound and needed skill set that is matched by our passion for engagement beyond the glass walls, stained glass ceilings, and ivory towers of the academy. I do this semester in and semester out, not merely because it is the job that I have been employed to do but because, at my roots, I know and believe that inherent within each of us (professors and students) is not only the ability to practice what we preach but also that the very classrooms that we occupy may become the biggest room for such improvements.

Endnotes

ⁱ See Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Katherine Allen, and Laura Gillman, “Interdisciplinarity as Self and Subject: Metaphor and Transformation,” in *Issues in Integrative Studies* 20 (2002): 1–26; Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, “Subverting Forced Identities, Violent Acts and the Narrativity of Race: A Diasporic Analysis of Black Women’s Radical Subjectivity in Three Novel Acts,” in *Journal of Black Studies* 32.5 (2002): 528–56; Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman, “Facing the Medusa: Confronting the Ongoing Impossibility of Women’s Studies,” in *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 2.2 (May 2001): 35–52; Katherine Allen, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and Laura Gillman, “Teaching to Transform: From Volatility to Solidarity in an Interdisciplinary Family Studies Classroom,” in *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies* 50.4 (2001): 317–25; “From Embodied Theodicy to Embodied Theos: Black Women’s Body and Pedagogy,” in *Being Black/Teaching Black*

, ed. Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 125–136; and Juan Floyd-Thomas and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, “Emancipatory Historiography as Pedagogical Praxis: The Blessing and the Curse of Theological Education for the Black Self and Subject,” in *Being Black/Teaching Black*, ed. Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 95–106.

ⁱⁱ The word “pedagogical” or later “pedagogy” is not used in this fashion to suggest that teaching revolves around “training or educating children.” Rather, I employ the word in reference to my intellectual design and identity politics involved in the art and science of teaching.